

Accel World: Volume 10 Illustrations

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Novel Illustrations

These are novel illustrations that were included in volume 10.



Front and Back Cover



Front Cover



Takumu and Haruyuki



?????



Kuroyukihime and Wakamiya Megumi



Lagoon Dolphin and Coral Merrow



Kirito



Color Circle and Metal Color Chart



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Character Description



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Accel World: Volume 10 Chapter 1

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Chapter 1 - Sound of Water from a Distant Day

Part 1

YOU WIN!

Arita Haruyuki held his breath as the blazing words came floating up in the center of his vision followed by an increase in his Burst Points.

A ten point reward is awarded in a two versus two tag team duel with parties that have equal total level values. It was soothing regardless how many times the metallic sound echoed as the points increased. From 298— it was now 308.

After a while, a system message that was not seen before popped up. [YOU CAN UP TO LEVEL 2] It says, «You can raise your level to 2».

"Ye.....Yeah.....!"

Haruyuki suddenly guts posed, raising the solid arm of his silver avatar «Silver Crow». Words of greetings from the level 2 and 3 opponent team combination caught his attention.

"Grats, man!"

"Think on where you'll use your level up bonus."

The flustered Haruyuki lowered his head as the two burst out. Greetings and blessings from the Gallery slowly faded as they left the surrounding building rooftops.

Giving a nod, the only one left was his blue, reinforced heavy armor exterior, piercing model, Level 4 tag partner «Cyan Pile».

"Congratulations Haru. You did well holding out for two weeks."

".....Thank you, Taku."

Haruyuki wanted to properly convey the overflowing grateful feelings in his heart, but he did not know what words to say. Repeating the same phrase he said with a greater voice was the least thing he could do.

"Thank you, really."

In fact, without the help of Cyan Pile, Mayuzumi Takumu, nothing would have significantly changed after two weeks.

From corresponding strategy on battle field attributes, armor structures and colors of duel avatar to local rules, manners and active duel's time and location in a specific area were given. He didn't even just stop from sharing information related about «Brain Burst», he even helped out on school homework and ports in the real world.

Without asking for Takumu's kind help, Haruyuki— Silver Crow, would not be able to save 300 points in a short period of time even if he is Accel World's first ever «Full Flight Duel Avatar» in seven years. No, on the contrary, it is

even possible to have lost the points.

Let alone dueling, Haruyuki's «Burst Linker Parent», the one who should be providing him guidance, can barely even connect to the net in a day because of being hospitalized. Haruyuki insisted on not to full dive and prioritize rest even without having the **Health Care Unit**HCU observe for 24 hours but there was not a day where she did not complain about it whenever he called.

Anyway, having that kind of situation, it was impossible seeking guidance and meeting his «Parent» Kuroyukihime—«Black King» Black Lotus in Accel World. Until she is moved on to the general ward next week, she will not be able to duel for the time being. As a result, Takumu retired from being a member of the blue legion «Leonids» and transferred to the black legion «Nega Nebulas», becoming his temporary instructor which he cannot really thank him enough for.....

Hearing Haruyuki's feelings in his small words, the smile returned from behind Takumu's face mask with a quiet voice.

"—Still, it is not enough to wash away all the guilt that I have."

".....Taku....."

Haruyuki faltered and averted his eyes as Takumu looked up at the moon above the «Old Castle» stage.

"Moreover Haru, in the first place the master..... if the black king was not attacked by unacceptable means this could not have happened. Therefore, it is my obligation and responsibility to help you in place of the king."

—Indeed, on a day of this year's summer break, Takumu's means of challenging Kuroyukihime over the Umesato Middle School Network cannot possibly be said as acceptable. The trick used by the Neuro-Linker «Back Door Program» was the connection between his two childhood friend and using Kurashima Chiyuri as a stepladder to continually «Intrude».

Using the hospital she had been transported in as a stage, Haruyuki who noticed the trick fought Takumu to protect Kuroyukihime who was in a coma because of a serious injury. Haruyuki's Aviation model avatar potential woke up as Takumu breaks him in a fierce battle to their limits where they throw their feelings at each other with all might and in the end, stopped and forgave him for deceiving them.

In the long run, Kuroyukihime was finally free from Takumu who was not even able to take away one point. Although Takumu's direct attack was indirectly related to the reason why Kuroyukihime was hospitalized—

".....I-It's nothing, Taku!"

Haruyuki shouted while shaking both of his hand desperately.

"Everything's because of me being foolish that's why Kuroyukihime-senpai was badly injured! B-Besides, think about it, if you did not keep on intruding on senpai, say..... that person who shut herself in the local network will not try to make her «Child» that would in turn make me into a Burst Linker. In other words, me fighting in Accel World now was somehow thanks to you....."

Though it was too forced to be a logical argument to say the following, Takumu shrugged his shoulder as he looked up at the pale moon.

".....Ha-Haha. You still have not changed, Haru. Just like from elementary school that is....."

Eh? He tilted his head as the quiet whispers reached his ears.

"Then, I'll take that as compliment.....is that okay?"

"Haha, of course."

Takumu's shoulder shook as he gave out a short laugh, turning his back completely at that point. Haruyuki murmured 'Thanks' as he saw the same broad back that he had in the real world and confirmed the time count on the upper part of the center of his vision after.

The tag duel ended unexpectedly fast, it began with 1800 seconds and still left about 200 seconds of time. Operating the Brain Burst menu once the battle has ended won't even need to use up one point from the extra Burst Points. Three minutes of time was enough.

On his decision, Haruyuki reached his hand to his health gauge, opening the main menu commonly known as «Insto». Its strange name came from large scale game storage, old fashioned amusement shops (it's what they call game centers at that time). It originated from paper manuals that were simply inserted at the upper part of the control panel called «Instruction Card».

The well developed holographic window design that appeared in the center of his vision accompanied with light sound effects was widely used on VRMMO-RPG.

A simplified silhouette of his duel avatar is shown on the initial screen. Silver Crow ignored seeing the silhouette exhibiting common techniques and currently learned special move when he touched some buttons on the same screen for it made him feel down.

The point management screen and storage screen tab appears on the top part. Ignoring the fact that there was no item in possession, he continued to move to the point management screen.

The numbers [308] was evidently displayed in the upper center part of the window. Naturally, it was all the points currently in his possession. A relaxed expression on his lips under the helmet can be seen, even if you look at it a number of times. In the real world, it was like the pleasure of having your bank savings be more than 10,000 yen for the first time. These points were earned by having his hand and foot (wings at times) literally put off to work.

—Would senpai be happy if she knew about this? No, with a calm face she would surely say 'You're still a chick'.

Haruyuki, while having thoughts in his mind, pressed the point's button and a shining [LEVEL UP] button popped up, overlapping the screen.

An English confirmation dialog which says that 300 points will be consumed to raise his level to 2 appeared. Haruyuki, seeing the yes button, felt an unusual cold feeling coming from the base of his fingers on the **User InterfaceUI** he was touching—

A Moment. Cyan Pile who was looking up at the sky turned around to look at the place where he felt something strange. He took a full step and shouted after he recognized Haruyuki's fidgeting gestures.

"D-Don't do it Haru! Stop!"

However, by the time he heard those scream, his fingers already pressed the three character [YES] button.

A sensational and exciting level up fanfare tune echoed in his hearing. A Level 2 message confirmation came up on the center of his vision.

And Finally.

The remaining Burst Points in his possession had dropped, from 308 points to 8 points.

Part 2

30 minutes after the battle ended, Haruyuki, realizing what mess he put himself into, woke up on the library reading booth he uses to dive on Shinjuku-ku.

The door immediately opened from outside and a hand quickly reached for Haruyuki, who was leaning dumbfounded on the reclining chair, forcefully removing his aluminum-silver Neuro-Linker from his neck. The virtual desktop displayed in his vision completely vanished.

Pulling off a stranger's Neuro-Linker is a crime, similarly, to do it among close friends was the highest form of disrespect. But now, Mayuzumi Takumu— Takumu couldn't help barging into Haruyuki's booth by all means because of a strong reason. Haruyuki learned that strong reason painfully.

It's because Haruyuki now only have 8 Burst Points left in his possession. If he lost to an intruder, he will lose 10 points and will lead to Brain Burst's forced uninstall in response to his total loss.

Haruyuki, finally recognizing the facts, opened both of his eyes in astonishment while looking at the blue-grey, stand up collared student uniformed Takumu. His best friend's lips trembled letting out a hoarse voice.

“.....For such a thing to happen.....I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, Haru. I forgot to tell you the most important thing.....
«Even if your points reached a possibility to level up, you shouldn't raise your level yet»..... As your instructor, it is important that I teach this matter to you even if I forgot something else.....”

—Indeed.

Level up in Brain Burst game, unlike other games where it is automatic when the experience reaches a fixed value, consumes points in your possession that is required for it.

A 300 point requirement is needed to raise your level to 2. That is to say, if the total points in possession before leveling up are 308 points, obviously, even if it's not explained the remaining points will be 8 points. That's why, «you shouldn't level up immediately». You should only consume points until you've reached the safety zone margin. It is an absolute level up condition—

Haruyuki similarly murmured a hoarse voice as he looked at Takumu's face that was biting his lips.

“.....Taku.....I..... was stupid. I should have given it a little thought.....I was thrilledhaving 300 points saved up..... I was.....stupid.....”

As of now, he is strongly aware that his «life as a Burst Linker» is now in an unstable state. Since Kuroyukihime gave him the program half a month ago, Haruyuki's points was greatly reduced to 70. Now, it is just 8 points. If Takumu did not forcibly remove his Neuro-Linker and lost to a fight between any «Intruders», Haruyuki might have lost Brain Burst as well.

He slowly quivered while his hand is holding the armrest of the mesh chair. *What to do? What's the best thing to do?* Those are the things running around on his mind. *The world changed, I thought that person changed my world. But after this, I believe I've changed it myself little by little.*

“Haru”

Unexpectedly, his right hand was strongly gripped. Takumu, whose cool passionate eyes were filled with light, moved his body from the sliding door's side of the small reading booth and strongly whispered.

“Everything's alright, Haru. It hasn't ended yet. There's a way on how to recover from this. For the mean time, let's go to your place.”

“.....Taku.....”

Takumu, who left the blue legion to become Haruyuki's instructor after the «hospital duel» two weeks ago, used to visit Haruyuki's home once in a while. No matter how many times he was invited, he only shakes his head with a smile. As if to say that he doesn't qualify completely to do so.

But there was a sudden change now due to an emergency, Takumu's restraint from before suddenly vanished.

“A-Ah, lets go. We can't talk in details here.”

He nodded a bit, stood up and removed his bag from its designated wall hook.

Their «Duel» takes place in a huge library facility that provides more than 200 seats of full dive capable e-book reading booths that they use after school.

Although it is convenient seeing the duel field in reality because it reduces the chances of splitting up, «Brain Burst» related talk can't be recklessly continued with the use of natural voice because of the place being crowded with neighboring elementary/middle/high school's students after school. Takumu had a little hesitation to direct link since a great amount of surrounding same aged students goes to the place.

—No, I don't care if anybody judges me but, Taku is, how to say it, stands out, and if seen by a friend in the same school, a shameful strange rumor might spread.....

Increasing his walking pace to run after his best friend who was in front, the cold sweat that spreads over his back dried while he was thinking. *With remaining 8 points, Takumu said it was somehow alright.* Haruyuki persuaded himself while deeply inhaling the slightly cold air of November as he passed the door.

The sky was fairly dark when they got down from the bus at North Kouenji, Suginami-ku's Oume highway after coming from Tokyo government office to get to their home apartment complex. The apartment complex has a resident used elevator that needs authentication every time it was used.

Haruyuki didn't know the exact time since his Neuro Linker was still removed until now and Takumu paid for his bus fair. Of course, there will be no risk of other Burst Linkers intruding if the global connection is cancelled after putting it back, but thinking of the «worst case scenario» he lost the courage in putting the machine back in his neck.

Takumu lives at the opposite A-building so he can't remember how many years it has been since they got on the same elevator. They got off at the 23rd floor of the B-building and continued to the unattended apartments's door locks with built in emergency intercoms that uses fingerprint and retina authentication to unlock.

“Sorry to intrude.”

Haruyuki continued to the entrance hallway while Takumu stepped in to follow and his lips gave a faint smile realizing that this is the first time since he visited the Arita household in along time.

“.....How nostalgic. It's been a year and half isn't it?”

“Eh.....already, It has been that long?”

Haruyuki's hands stopped as he was about to take out some slippers when he tried to recall the memories inside his head. Takumu last came to this apartment— to be accurate «stopped coming» since he and Chiyuri started dating each other in the spring of 6th grade in elementary school. As of now its autumn of 1st grade in middle school, certainly it has been a year and a half since then.

“Here, I still even have these slippers.”

While he said those words jokingly, Haruyuki was at Takumu's feet lining up small, faded yellow colored slippers.

The one used by Takumu has its cover part with green threaded embroidery of a cute elephant face. Haruyuki still even has the one he used which is the one embroidered with a blue bear. Chiyuri used the one embroidered with a pink rabbit. The full set of slippers has not been thrown out even though it was rarely used. It was left alone on the rack for one and a half year.

The three of them bought the same set of slippers as present to each other on the Christmas of their 4th grade in elementary. In short, it should not only be in Haruyuki's home. The green elephant/blue bear/pink rabbit slippers mini-set should also be in Chiyuri's and Takumu's homes.

The Kurashima household even still has that mini-set, he confirmed it when the two of them went to apologize for the «back door program» issue two weeks ago. Trying on the tight slippers, Takumu knew what words Haruyuki's smile was trying saying.

“.....My mother, threw those out of our home when I left sixth grade. I cried in front of my parents, but that was the last of it.....”

“I see. Then, let's buy another set of slippers this Christmas.”

Haruyuki spoke with a straight face, Takumu gave out a short laugh.

“Haha..... that will be out of size already. How about a set of mug-cups instead?”

“Ooh, as expected of the stylish Mayuzumi-sensei.”

Don He exaggeratedly pretended to tumble as he opened the room's door since his back is tired.

Haruyuki's room was 6-jyou wide and had a south faced veranda. Back in the past before moving out due to divorce, his father was using it as a study room. The east faced wall's built in bookshelves is a rare find nowadays. His father's hard bound book collection from the last generation was still unchanged. Of course Haruyuki doesn't even have a copy of his book in there.

Instead of books, the thing that was on the shelf was his alternative luxuries, old full dive technologies that uses game pads and game pack specific optical disk and memory card. Some of it have the age limit designation of Z at that time— it has excessive content of either bloody or fleshy components that was secretly contained in it— *Chiyuri and Kuroyukihime must not be let to enter this room. Of course, besides Chiyuri, I can't think of any situation where Kuroyukihime will need to visit the Arita household.*

Takumu had a nostalgic look as he touched the back of the packages one by one with his fingertips near the shelf.

“—On the day when we can't play outside because of rain, this was the strange game where the 3 of us was immersed with. That racing game.....ah! that fighting game. Haru you're the most knowledgeable on most of the titles but on this one game where Chi-chan was so strong like a demon, even if it was 2-1 we didn't beat her.....”

“Ah- that's right..... Maybe, she can be a powerful Burst Linker.....”

Having the same thought of 'that wasn't possible!', the two who looked at each other was grinning.

Obviously, the three who used to play with «Games» everyday 3-4 years ago was not using the vision projected Neuro-Linker models, full dive models was used at that time.

However, games that contain anime-like and comic-like components have strict rating standards on people's age. Elementary students can only play newly produced games by intellectual training group or puzzle group and idyllic graphic adventures group games. Even if he asked an adult to buy a game, it wouldn't load on a child's Neuro-Linker.

And to go there, Haruyuki saves up some of his lunch money to respond to the expected merchandise fee and use the account left behind by his father on the Arita household home server — The last generation buys and collects the game title through mail order — of course, race crash-explosion fighting's hitting, kicking and beams and in an RPG stage where you peel off and massacre innocent small creatures for money and items was splendid specifications. It was unlike the 2D screen where there will be pain in the fingers holding the controller. There is no need to compare on which is more fun between those and children provided games.

Now that he's a middle school student, shooting and slashing people 12+rating Neuro-Linker games can now be played. Haruyuki relieves stress from school by playing a blood thirsty FPS and a thrilling race game everyday about a half month ago. But now, those startup icons don't exist in his virtual desktop anymore. It's because he understands now. The ultimate duel fighter game takes place in another reality. That world's overwhelming information, exchanging pain on skirmishes is a one time experience that cannot be reversed. You absolutely wouldn't want it to.....

His reminiscing has now caught up with the current critical situation. Haruyuki sat at the edge of the bed with a thud and gave a long sigh.

The situation was noticed by Takumu and stepped closer after he turned from the shelf. He put his bag down and flexibly sat down nearby.

Haruyuki asked timidly while looking at the neat face of his best friend.

“.....Taku, before, you said 'there is still a way to recover'. Besides a sink or swim duel, is there really another way.....? The only remaining points are just 8 points.....”

“Ah...don't worry. It wouldn't be something that will lead you to a total loss.”

With a low nod Takumu said some unexpected words.

“Haru, you have a XSB cable for direct connection right?”

“Eh..... A-Ah”

As he Nod, he pulled out the left side drawer and took out a silver colored bundled cord. The 2 meter length cable was taken by Takumu and inserted the other side in his blue Neuro-Linker terminal. Haruyuki was then surprised by the lines that came out of Takumu's mouth.

“Now, let's direct duel, take half of my remaining points. By that, we can avoid the danger of total loss at the mean time. Then, we'll choose a time and place where we can manage tag-matches slowly and continue to survive until we return to the safety zone.”

“.....!”

He suddenly gulped. Certainly, in a direct link duel there is no limit on «intruding the same person in a day». The theory of taking a desired number of points by repeating the duel for a number of times is possible. It is a very simple and efficient crisis prevention plan.

Haruyuki was still stunned while the other side of the plug was held by Takumu.

“Then, Haru.”

Insisting on putting the direct link plug on his Neuro-Linker— Haruyuki stopped his hands. A 10 cm length apart from it, Takumu's face faintly distorted. He then let out a smile on his lips to endure whatever Haruyuki's reason may be.

“Ah.....of course, you think that you can't trust me. I'll deceive you, attack and defeat you, then your Brain Burst at

that instant.....”

“N-No. That's not, that's not it Taku”

Haruyuki suddenly grabbed Takumu's left shoulder with his right hand. Under the school uniform clothing were strong muscles as stiff as his feelings. Haruyuki earnestly argued.

“I wasn't thinking that you will betray me. That's not it, also I..... don't have the right to do such things to you.....”

“W-What are you saying Haru!”

Just now, Takumu turned his body while Haruyuki's right hand was till strongly grasping his left shoulder. Takumu's Intellectual looking face showed a wholehearted facial expression while shouting.

“I don't care of those circumstances right now! If you are defeated by a same level enemy, it would lead to a 10 point loss. Your Brain Burst will forcibly uninstall! And to forget something important like that is my fault! So it is natural that we have to split my points.....”

“But, I don't want your points to be bargained!”

Haruyuki didn't know that there will be a vigorous fight from the beginning and refused.

In the first place, Takumu depended on a «Back Door Program» cheat tool because of the pressure of overusing his remaining Burst Points. This past two weeks, Haruyuki's tag battle with him was somewhat rehabilitation but, at the last moment they needed to recover to a safety zone. If Haruyuki transfers half now, it will once again decrease to a danger level without a doubt.

However Takumu's tone indicated a refusal.

“You don't have to worry about such things. We can have another direct link duel and exchange again someday. This is an emergency escape. And if you totally lose here..... the hospitalized master will receive a huge shock. Didn't you think about it?”

“.....That's.....”

In fact— that's right. Even now, the **Health Care Unit**HCU micromachines helps on curing the «Master», Kuroyukihime's serious injury which she gained two weeks ago. To see her «Child», Haruyuki's everyday growth is something to look forward to. Knowing about the increase of his level to 2 followed by a loss would leave her in shock and make her condition worse. Takumu began to continue with an intense tone.

“I'm telling you Haru! You being level 2, we can continue our «Nega Nebulas» territory proclamation to the vacant space area Suginami! It will be after the release of master from hospital and we wouldn't worry on connecting to global net. Didn't you say so yourself?”

“Uh.....”

Haruyuki was grinding his teeth hardly while thinking sincerely. *What should I do now?*

Eventually, the shivering lips let out a stuttering voice.

“.....Taku. But.....But, you know. Brain burst's «Draw» command exist while «Give Up» command doesn't. That's why, in a duel where you let me win, if you think of it, I will have to hit for 30 minutes until..... the HP gauge lowers and continue a one sided attack..... moreover I can't land a fatal attack. That.....I don't want that.....”

As Takumu heard those words, the right hand's grip lessened. He then smiled a little.

“It's fine, I don't mind at all. For the sake of helping a comrade..... a friend, I wouldn't mind any hit I take on the general duel field. Well then, hurry and insert the plug, Haru.”

Takumu's voice and facial expression is filled with true feelings. After a while, he extended the XSB cable above Haruyuki's lap.

Two weeks has passed since he became a same legion companion but even now, all of Takumu's words and deeds appear to be a self punishment. There is no assurance that there is something hidden in the things that he do. The damage in the hospital duel when Haruyuki exchanged fist with him with all of his power, as he continued to push the feelings contained deep down within his heart for how many years was expressed without leaving anything. After the battle, he apologized to Chiyuri and Kuroyukihime and left the blue legion. Haruyuki believes that Takumu's sins were washed away.

That's why he can't rely on Takumu now. He and Takumu are permanent equals as a friend and comrade. Haruyuki declared that himself at the end of that battle. Takumu relied on feelings to comply with the critical part he was involved in, that's why his words here became a lie.

And more than anything else—. No matter what situation it is, to attack an unresisting friend one sided to take points would be a stealing behavior. Haruyuki's «Gamer Soul» won't permit it.

“.....Even senpai.....Even the Black King, Black Lotus.”

Haruyuki moved his mouth while staring at the little pale colored eyes of Takumu.

“That person, to protect me from the rampant car, used the «Physical Full Burst» command. Her remaining Points became close to danger. But that person didn't say 'Let's split your points' even once to me. Even if I say it, she will surely get unreasonably angry. That person for me, I can't compare the level, strength and experience with but..... I want to be the same Burst Linker like senpai.”

For a few seconds, Takumu didn't say anything.

“.....As expected, you really are one pleasant and stubborn guy, Haru.”

The hand that was gripping the shoulder was loosened and patted as it moved away. Takumu removed the Neuro Linker cable, tied it in a bundle like before. Takumu changed his facial expression.

“—Indeed, my points, even if I transfer only a little amount, it will not be a basic solution. The problem is, the points left are in danger, and the pressure will unconsciously call out impatience. Being impatient, your outlook in battle becomes narrow. The ability to react at a situation is lowered. Before, I said 'win and survive battles', but to do that is really...extremely hard. «I want to win» are the feelings that are important and «I don't want to lose points» are feelings that are somewhat similar. To be honest, in early autumn, when the points remaining decreased from 100 points, my general duel average winning percentage was at 30 percent level.”

“.....Ah, but somehow, I understand. Me too, if I gamble in a duel, I will not be able to move because I'll lose confidence.....”

Haruyuki murmured. Takumu's 'I wish it was just unusual confidence' bitter smile, changed to a serious look once again.

“Your way to escape the current situation—. There is something, there is one way left.”

“Eh..... there's still something, another way?”

He widened his eyes. Takumu hesitated to say it instantly and replied with a low voice.

“Yes. It's quite risky.....I don't think the possibility is zero.....but maybe, the points that you could gain here might be stolen away from you if you're not cautious.”

Haruyuki Held his breath waiting toward the continuation. Takumu then said more unexpected words.

“Hire a «Bouncer». Your points will recover to the safety zone once again.”

Part 3

The following Saturday, 12:50 p.m. in the afternoon.

Haruyuki and Takumu were together on a rocking train in the Chuo-line.

Compared to the automobile or bike road traffic situation which greatly changed in the early 21st century, the train vehicles have still kept its basic structure for nearly 100 years. Driving it now is left to an AI that can automatically control everything making shakes and noises greatly improved however, passengers being cramped in a single place on the cube-like rail vehicle didn't change.

—Ah, this feeling, how nostalgic.

Haruyuki murmured in his mind as he stand near Takumu.

Even if viewed from Haruyuki's eyes, the plain clothed Takumu looked stylish and not stingy. The 175cm tall first year middle schooler looked refined in his faded black jeans with a knitted rough woolen bundle and wore an indigo blue mod coat on top making a lot of women in the same cart glance at him couple of times awhile ago.

But those glances are suddenly filled with an abyss doubt the moment they see the mobile poyon like creature, cozily standing at Takumu's side. Haruyuki can't think of anything about that kind of combination even if their positions have been reversed. When he was still at elementary school, there was a time where he couldn't stand it anymore and wanted to dig a hole to be buried in it but fortunately, about a year ago, he gained the resistance on that nostalgic grim situation. And so, Haruyuki's composure didn't falter with strangers' downsizing gazes.

The risky situation where his life as a Burst Linker will be determined depends on the intention of the person they are about to contact.

It was soon indicated in their vision the announcement of the train's arrival at the Ochanomizu station. Takumu regretfully pulled the sleeve of Haruyuki's stadium jumper and murmured.

“We're getting off.”

“Ah.....yeah.”

He nodded as he rubbed his sweaty hands on the side of his baggy pants. *The meeting place designated to contact the other party was at the terrace of a cafe in a large scale bookshop on Jinbouchou. It's a small walk from Ochanomizu station but it will still take about 30 minutes.*

Of course, to meet directly face to face wasn't necessary since the other person is also a Burst Linker. Then why would an appointment in the real world be necessary? That's because, the only «Bouncer» in Accel World demanded it as a compensation.

«Expose reality»— the biggest taboo of a Burst Linker.

“B-Bouncer!?”

Yesterday, Haruyuki shouted the words he mimicked from Takumu after being speechless from what Takumu said in his room.

Takumu nodded and began to explain it calmly.

“Even I, who have only observed with the Gallery for a couple of times, haven't experienced a direct conversation. His avatar name is «Aqua Current». The armor's color is unknown.”

“Aqua.....Current.”

He murmured the unfamiliar name. It wouldn't be surprising since there are about 1000 Burst Linkers in central Tokyo, the problem is the one that followed.

“Armor color.....unknown? What do you mean by unknown?”

“You'll understand if you see it.....is what I want to say, but it would be better if you have a lot of background information. That's right.....what could be the best way to explain it.....”

The always logical Takumu unusually groaned for several seconds and uttered somewhat unexpected words.

“Haru. «Water», is «Water colored» right?”

“Uhe.....?”

He leaked out a dumb voice and began to think it over. *Speaking of water's color, the typical color should be light blue.*

But obviously, water is colorless and transparent. Depending only on the situation that it would look like bluish.

“In short, Aqua Current's armor is not water colored but it is.....the color of water?”

“That's right. I don't think you can understand any more of this without actually seeing it. Also, rather than the outward appearance, the play style is more important.”

Takumu cut his words there, the talk to only resume after Haruyuki brought a grapefruit juice from the kitchen which he moistened his throat with and soon then continued.

“—He is, Accel World's only «Bouncer».....maybe that person makes it a business.....maybe role playing as one.....but anyway, he is an advocate of that style. In addition, it's only limited to a newbie. To be more specific, only for Burst Linkers who have yet to surpass level 2 and have their remaining points in danger, he will partner with the client in a tag-match until they are able to return to the safe zone. Rumors say that even until now, there hasn't been a client that received a total loss during the mission.”

“.....S-Seriously.....”

Dumbfounded as he opened his eyes, Haruyuki earnestly tried to retain and understand Takumu's story.

“Uhm.....in other words, that Aqua-san, tag-teams with level 1 or 2 newbie whose points are on the verge of exhaustion and that person is completely protected in duels until he wins?”

“That is right.”

“A-Amazing, to do that kind of thing..... I'm sure he's a high-ranked tremendous veteran.....around level 7 or 8, with a position near a king.....”

Takumu heard Haruyuki's admiration, smiled a little, shook his head and told the most shocking words at that day.

“No. Aqua Current is commonly known as «The One». He is called that because his current level is.....1.”

He recalled yesterday's conversation as they headed south of Meidai street and after 15 minutes, a large intersection appeared ahead of them. Yasukuni street is included in the so-called Kanda-Jinbouchou area— the world's largest «Book Town», continuing to exist since the last generation.

Needless to say, in the current year 2046, «Book» is a term used to refer for Neuro Linker-used electronic-books. Selling publications has been completely online, the readers buy the books and use a dedicated viewer, of course to read, in their virtual desktop, those who prefer Full-Dive can also enjoy using its «Book Form» appearance on some cases.

However, there are still many people who say that 'the books are just digital data, not like real books which are printed and carefully bounded in reality'. Even Haruyuki felt attracted to Kuroyukihime who was reading a beautifully bound hardcover book in the school lounge and similarly, felt nostalgic on a large-sized encyclopedia in his father's collection whose face he can't remember.

The stream of electronic-book era wasn't really considered as a cause of extinction of real world bookstores because they have specialized on customer needs that made them survive. Rather than selling books, they make books— the electronic-books that are brought in by the customers are printed on paper and then bounded. In other words, the «Bookstore» business that has never before had a print shop like function, one of the few published-book in paper media marketer, and the former secondhand book marketer still crowds on Kanda-Jinbouchou area.

Haruyuki and Takumu were headed to a situated building with a large scale bookshop facing Surugadai-shita intersection. On the building's rooftop was a bearer of paper culture's pride, rather than **Augmented Reality**AR, a genuine large panel advertisement with a print of a character from a book intended for young readers was proudly enshrined. That was the only business advertisement that they saw since the two of them had their Neuro-Linker disconnected from the global net until now.

The mysterious bouncer «Aqua Current» made the building's top floor bookshop cafeteria establishment as the designated meeting place after Haruyuki sent him a job request on his only mail-address contact last night. Intuitively, before crossing the intersection in front of the bookshop, Haruyuki gently pulled Takumu's sleeve.

“It's fine here, Taku.”

“Eh.....but.”

His childhood friend shook his head and with a hushed voice strongly spoke.

“«Reality Break is the greatest taboo».....if real information spreads, there might be a PK you know. For me to pay the price because of being on the verge of total loss is unavoidable. But for you to endanger yourself is not necessary. This is not meaningless obstinacy.”

“.....I understand.”

Fortunately Takumu, whose face was not fully convinced, nodded and pointed at a hamburger shop in the vicinity.

“Well then, I'll be waiting over there. I'll be expecting a good report from you.”

Making a step, this time Takumu grabbed Haruyuki's left arm.

“—Good luck, Haru. Whatever happens, it's still the beginning.”

Supposedly a tag duel with the contacted bouncer for the sake of restoring points can immediately take place, or possibly an initial duel where I am unluckily defeated and Brain Burst would probably be lost.

With a slight shiver, Haruyuki deeply nodded.

“Ah, I understand. Even I don't have the intention of going down here. Don't worry! I'll come back with profit.”

“.....Somehow, that feels like a speech from a terrible at work protagonist of a computer game movie or something.”

The tensioned facial expression changed and a smile appeared from Takumu after saying those words, Haruyuki was sure that it was for lightening-up his feelings. *Certainly, the ways of movies makes the protagonist's plans a success in smooth way without even trying.* Haruyuki grinned and laughed but was truly grateful to his best friend's innermost concern and responded with bright voice.

“In a sense, you don't have to worry. Besides, those movies definitely settle at a happy ending. Well then...I'm going now.”

With a step, Haruyuki turned around, made a slightly clenched fist and ran on the pedestrian crossing exactly as the signal turned blue.

Inside the large bookshop, a nostalgic smell of paper faintly drifted.

Newly published books are sold in the first and second floor. Secondhand books are on the third and fourth floor. On demand electronic-books are printed and bounded on the fifth and sixth floor while the seventh floor is a cafeteria where you can savor the just finished books.

Haruyuki used the elevator to immediately go up to the seventh floor and first had an extensive look at the store's wide interior while he was at the entrance. Approximately 2/3 of the 30 desk tables are occupied with customers who are mostly flipping a page with one hand while drinking. Surprisingly, there were only a few middle and high school students as well as youngsters. Three four-person group of intellectuals gathered to read small booklets and a person who reads a small book collection, it would be impossible to know who «Aqua Current» is with this. —*No, it is also possible that he was inside the store earlier.*

However, I have prepared for the worst before coming into this business.

Haruyuki's stepped into the store at that very moment the appointment time of 1:30 p.m. was indicated in his lower right vision and stood in front of the counter with an elderly waiter which was also included in the mailed instructions.

“Um.....I have an appointment at table number 17.”

‘Right away sir!’ He was guided to the table and when he was about to say it, the table was really unattended. A faint steam rising on a coffee cup and a small shopping bag was on the natural-wood table. For the mean time, he sat opposite of the two seated chair, took a glance at the paper-made menu that the waiter took out and ordered an orange juice.

Fuu He exhaled and glanced at his surroundings again to confirm. The table having its right side near the window, a panoramic view of Jinbouchou can be seen over the organic light control glass. In front and the left-side are tables with adult customers. There wasn't a feeling of anyone's sight looking but, Aqua Current is checking Haruyuki from somewhere no doubt—

He was thinking until now. A faint *Chichichi* electronic sound lured his hearing. After several seconds, it repeated. And then he noticed. The sound was coming from inside the white shopping bag on the table.

Hearing the sound for the third time, he timidly inserted his hand on the bag. he felt a plank-like object on his fingertips. He gently pulled out a tablet-like device. It was a multi-purpose portable device before Neuro Linker was released, popularized and implemented. The soft-keyboard window was the only thing displayed at the 7-inch ElectroluminescentEL monitor. A significant [Input Name] command floated on the window.

Arita..... was reflexively pound into but, he hurriedly pressed backspace and moved once again. The character string that was entered was of course, [Silver Crow].

The screen completely changed as soon as he pressed the enter key.

“.....!”

A collection of a young man's poor hair, eyebrows in a timid angle, round eyes and surprised cheeks— it was not other than Haruyuki's face. It was taken by a small camera provided in the top part of the device. The photo vanished as soon as the next window floated.

[The compensation is confirmed to be received. At 13:40, the mission request will commence. Be prepared and standby.] The new sentence merely appeared for 10-seconds. The device's power cut-out on its own and the monitor blacked out.

While unconsciously putting back the tablet to its original place inside the shopping bag, Haruyuki now couldn't help but think.

—*Why? Why does the mysterious bouncer Burst linker «Aqua Current» do such things?*

He continuously chugged the orange juice that just arrived in one go for half a minute to fuel his brain for a full revolution. *For sure, a Burst Linker's full name and portrait will be an information that possesses an unbelievable value in Accel World. After its release, «Physical Knocker» or PK named outlaws' real attacks can rob Burst Point's roots and branches. Even information about the roots would sell high.*

*However, as Aqua Current's client, you have to be on the verge of losing all points and be a newbie with level that's still up to 2. Such Burst Linkers wouldn't be prey to real attack. Otherwise, it would've seemed to be none other than «Harvesting a Raised Crop» right? Will the portrait held be once again sold to **Physical Knocker**PKs when the points are raised and restored to the safety zone?*

Though last night, Haruyuki's words weren't like what Takumu said. *Aqua Current guards the Burst linker, after that, there wasn't a single person who suffered a real attack. Conversely, Aqua Current's popularity as a bouncer will fall to the ground if there was such a case and there wouldn't be a request from anybody anymore.*

All in all, the reason he adhere to bouncer play style and demands real information as compensation is as usual still a great mystery.....

Thinking that far, the clock hit the 35th minute. His stomach was once again filled with an air of tension and at the same time, another signal was transmitted.

“Not good.....”

Haruyuki hurriedly looked around the store and stood up as he found the toilet sign. To get through with things that have to be done is a Burst Linker's common practice since during a duel, the real body's physiological desires are fundamentally cut-off.

He took off his stadium jumper, hung it at the chair's back and head to the toilet with a quick pace. *Good grief, in this technologically advanced society, leaking unnecessary moisture should also be soon made online right.....?*

Perhaps because of thinking something trivial or because of habitually curving timidly to look down or because of the Neuro-Linker being globally disconnected or possibly because all those are the original problems. Haruyuki tried to enter the passageway with the toilet sign but was a little too late to notice someone who was coming out just behind the corner. The other person stopping one meter away, the collision could've been avoided if Haruyuki was looking properly. However, Haruyuki, who was lost in his thoughts while looking down, only had the brown colored short boots' tip to enter his vision, barely sensing the situation at that time, a small voice was raised.

“Ah.....!”

He tried to brake abruptly. But, his real body was too sluggish and couldn't control the inertial mass. Haruyuki, who looked like stepping on a tatara, quickly moved a step to the left of the other person. Haruyuki advancing forward and lightly stumbling on his own— was supposed to happen. Unfortunately.

The other person moved at the same time making Haruyuki foolishly try to change direction again. He tried to go back again to the original course while on a slight panic. Nevertheless, those actions caused a calamity, the left-foot stepping to the left caught up with the right foot. Nothing was left, the blue-lineage duel avatar's body was hit with an attack that can't be matched without rushing off—.

If a text was written, donponyuwanzudenn or something like that together with its consecutive sensation would be there as Haruyuki fell down with all might in the passage, dragging along the person in front of him.

——*At least. I hope at least, the other person wouldn't be among the following.* ① *Among the aged-people.*
② *Among the women.* ③ *Among the scary people.*

“u.....uuh.....”

A voice immediately passed the vicinity, it clearly didn't carry a ② which was Haruyuki's body and soul prayer. His only wish is what was left is not the same as ③. His body being in contact with the other person, he rolled to the left and raised his body like rubbing his back on a wall, most of the sound he made couldn't become a voice while apologizing.

“So.....Sorr.....Sor, Sorry.....!”

Sweat and tears blurred the center of Haruyuki's vision, his offset collision partner finally raised his upper body. Because the other person stopped, the careless/excessive-speed/not looking-on person in front was obviously to be blamed with a rate of 10:0. However, the other person, no matter how you look at it, is an unknown-aged or slightly-aged woman— A race which Haruyuki's communication skills had only partially developed with.

The body was quite slim. She was wearing a grey pea coat and slim jeans. Short haired, having its tips winding in. And a small face with a red plastic-framed glasses, which is unusual nowadays. Moreover, a girl that suits to be in a book's paper hardcover.

Seemed that nothing applied to ③, with a small relief, Haruyuki once again bowed deeply.

“Um.....I'm really sorry, I didn't saw you earlier.”

“.....It's nothing”

The glasses girl stood up after saying those short words. Looking around, she soon tried to extend her hand near the floor where Haruyuki is. Before that, Haruyuki had already noticed a small shoulder bag that fell and his hands reflexively extended to pick it up.

At that instant, the girl spoke with a small voice.

“Ah, you can't.....”

“Eh?”

Surprising Haruyuki, another mistake was there once again. The bag was raised in its bottom, the flap opened and something small and plate-like rolled out from inside.

“Sor, Sorry.....!”

Hanging a third time apology in his throat like a hiccup, Haruyuki extended his left hand again to pick up the thing that fell on the floor.

“.....!”

At the same time, the girl took a short breath and quickly leaned over. However, Haruyuki who was sitting on the floor was slightly faster. A portable net terminal that was rare nowadays was picked up. He tried to return the small machine that can be wrapped within a palm in its bag— but before it could happen. The upside down terminal's monitor was caught in an eye glance.

“.....e”

A small voice leaked from his mouth.

The motion sensor recorded the shock when it fell cancelling its sleep causing the monitor to light up. *That's great. The problem now is the photo in the window on the display screen.* He stared intently at the familiar face.

“Please give it back.”

The girl tried to take back the terminal after saying those small words. Yet Haruyuki, drawing back his hand unconsciously, prevented it. It's because the thing projected in the monitor, bossa hair, rounded eyes, pure face, and was really an unclear picture of a young man's face. That person, wherever you look at it, is Arita Haruyuki no doubt.

“What.....This.....How.....”

Holding the terminal devotedly, the dumbfounded Haruyuki looked up at the glasses girl. The small face stiffened, the girl's eyes twitched and she trembled while Haruyuki's hand again sacked the terminal and put it in the bag not letting her to leave.

It is possible that this girl fell at first sight and took Haruyuki's photo secretly— *it is not impossible. With that, the possibility that it is the truth and the possibility of having a large meteorite drop tomorrow causing earth's ruin is pretty much the same.* In other words, that is probably no doubt, a mistake—.

She, a book loving glasses girl, fit in the category «②Women» from the category a while ago and at the same time, a «④Burst Linker».

Earlier, the tablet terminal was placed before Haruyuki sat on the table and this woman operated a portable terminal while on the toilet. Then, the photo taken by the portable tablet's camera was transmitted, she then went out the toilet and collided with Haruyuki, and that's what happened. Then, in that case. She is, The «Bouncer» that would help Haruyuki, the legendary Burst Linker with a second name of «The One»——

“.....«Aqua Current»-san.....?”

Haruyuki sent out murmurs, the glasses girl pretended to look up at the ceiling and leaned her back at the wall with a thud.

Part 4

For now, Haruyuki came out from the men's room finishing things that needs to be finished and unwillingly took the glasses girl to the original table.

They silently glanced at each other after taking a seat across. Haruyuki shrank his neck and shoulder to the limit when their eyes met and peeked at the situation with flickering upturned eyes.

Looking at the woman sitting there from a well-lighted area, she was wearing a pair of glasses and conservative clothes as well as hairdo and looked like being taken aback to someplace exhibiting a mysterious atmosphere. Her pupil color was thick and cannot be said good, simply looking inside is not easy because of the obstruction, giving off an unknown feeling. She was like someone who gives mercy, there was some kind of pressure.....

Then, suddenly the girl — probably seems one or two year-level higher — put her hands in the bag and took out a disk shaped object. There were two silver color plugs protruding from its sides. It was a XSB cable with a cord reel.

There was a soft sound as she pulled the other side of the plug, lifted the inward curl of her short hair, and inserted it at a dark red Neuro-Linker which is similar to her glasses. After that, the other side of the plug was extended and slid right in front of Haruyuki.

“.....err.....umm.....”

Unable to move his hands, Haruyuki alternately looked at the plug and at the girl's sight.

In this situation, there wouldn't be any other purpose aside from inserting it at his Neuro Linker. But that is a kind of «Direct Communication Cable» where if it's used for direct connection in a public space, it will be like a declaration of an unusual relationship between two persons. That's something that he can't forget since the lunch break of his fifth grade in elementary. A frivolous classmate abruptly made a direct connection between a beautiful girl in class and Haruyuki who was sitting at the back as a prank, the girl cried hysterically till the end making him guilty of that worst incident. In other words, making such direct connections and **stuff**, such as making direct connection in public places with Haruyuki, can only be done by the Black King who was the only person who hold the courage to do so —.....

—I see. This person is like Kuroyukihime-senpai..... I don't mean the appearance; it's something like the presence, something like the strength.....

With that thought at that moment, Haruyuki extended his hand and picked up the plug.

Surely, this is the last time I will have direct connection with other person besides senpai. Considering such things, he inserted the Neuro Linker connector.

A flickering red lettered Wired Connection notice appeared in his vision and disappeared. After a second, inside his head, there was something really delicate and lovely— despite that, a thought voice resounded through the core pin.

[.....I am now, considering two possibilities. You are a very skillful impostor acting, to breakdown my reality you intentionally bumped with me... or else, you're an authentic birdbrain.]

[haa.....]

Giving out a dumb voice first, Haruyuki hurriedly continued his words.

[It's true, the second one that is, I don't know how I will prove it, I can't think of anything immediately.....]

Come to think of it, these words already fit of a birdbrain. Intentional blunder and the likes can be said impossible, for example in this situation, by intentionally throwing down the glass of orange juice won't be some kind of proof, it would only increase the other person's suspicion. He eagerly rubbed both of his index fingers together as his brains went into revolutions.

[.....um, this is also not an evidence, the reason my remaining points was in danger, that is..... having the points go over 300 gave me a deep impression of power in my mind, while engrossed with it I pushed the level up button.....]

There once again, he took a glimpse of the other person's face. This lady— probably «Aqua Current», had a

different facial expression and nodded lightly after a short while.

[That's the truth and to some extent makes sense. These two weeks, the above 70 percent winning percentage average was hit by «Silver Crow», why would he suddenly become in a near death state I wonder.]

[M-my situation, you know about it!?!]

Unintentionally leaning his big body forward, his stomach hit the edge of the table, the shock made the 1/3 juice remaining on the glass shake violently. The lady unaffectedly reached out her hands to support it and let out a voice at the same time.

[Right now in Accel World, the only person not hearing or knowing the rumor about you is the person himself.]

[Eh.....T-T-That, to that extent.]

Feeling embarrassed thinking of things, Haruyuki scratched his head as the cute thought voice continued to stream in his hearing.

[The only person with the full flight type. The intellect part is unexpectedly visible because of easily taking offense. Weak against Ffemale type duel avatar in close combat. Although sly means were used on the person in question, he splendidly escapes.]

[.....]

Haruyuki's loose mouth hardened as he glimpsed at the lady lifting her newly ordered cup of darjeeling tea.

[Seems just like the rumor that you're like a child, it is decided that you're an inborn birdbrain then.]

[.....]

—I suppose this is one of the delightful scenes right? Yeah, for sure.

As he told that to himself, for some reason Haruyuki's eyes was blurred with sweat.

A clack sound was raised when the cup was returned by the glasses lady as she noticed Haruyuki having an inner conflict and stretched her back a little then spoke.

[It became an irregular situation, for the mean time, let's have an introduction. I am «Aqua Current». Under the agreement, I will guard you until your very low points return to the safety zone with 50 points restored]

[Ah.....y-yes, pleased to meet you! I'm «Silver Crow».]

pekori He lowered his head. It might be a strange scene if viewed from the surrounding — actually, teenager boys and girls are apparently have flickering gazes — but he can't afford to worry. For Haruyuki, this strange lady is the only lifeline. Accel World's sole bouncer, bodyguard of zero request failure.....

[Eh, ah, that.]

There at last, the first thing that came to Haruyuki's mind was a contradiction.

[Um, I too, heard rumors about Aqua Current-san lately and wanted to ask something.....]

[You can call me «Karen».]



[T-Then me too, use «Crow» to cal-..... no I mean, I, believed that Karen-san is a guy..... a friend told me about you, and that's what I thought.....]

Yes, it's no one but Takumu, when he said Aqua Current the pronoun «He» was used. Since that, Haruyuki classed the capable bouncer as a macho guy in a flashy-suit outfit — there's no teenager like that but — she was associated. And certainly, how could that be a bookstore matched glasses lady.

But Aqua Current, Karen for short, said it's not a big deal and shrugged her shoulders lightly.

[My duel avatar's appearance is an indistinguishable Mmale/Ffemale type.....Also, me too, I haven't said a word that I am a woman.]

[.....Heh? T-That means.]

Haruyuki opening his eyes and mouth absentmindedly, first looked at Karen's face and impolitely looked 70cm lower next, gazing nearby. However due to the tough cloth of the worn pea coat, it's hard to say with only this visual information.

—No, several minutes ago I, my face hit something. If the touched sensation can be played back then it would be answered. Remember. Revive my memories.

Having such weird thoughts, though it seems that it is not surely conveyed through the cable, Karen with a somewhat cold gaze said.

[It is past 5 minutes of the scheduled time but, from now on the tag duel will start. If it's possible we reach the target point at Chiyoda area, then we'll end there. If not, we'll continue with opponents at the neighboring Akihabara. Is there any questions?]

Here for example, if for argument's sake 'What is your bust cup?' is asked, what would happen? Saying that thought didn't emerge on my intra-cerebral mind for even 1 millisecond is a lie. But fortunately, a saving-throw will power succeeded, Haruyuki bouncily shook his neck side to side.

[No, i-i-it's okay..... I-I-I'm in your care.]

[Then, let's first register each other as tag partners. Once you're globally connected, accelerate immediately.]

[Y-Y-Yes!]

Nodding momentarily, Haruyuki first opened Brain Burst's console screen and registered «Aqua Current» as tag partner. Karen nodding to confirm, the Neuro-Linker's global net connection button was pressed. A connecting notice was lit, after a moment it changed to an earth icon when the connection was established, then shouted out a voice.

“«Burst Link»!”

Finally, this is the moment of moments, the life or death final battle.

Nevertheless, in the world that went into a blue frozen moment, Haruyuki's thoughts were occupied, *Is this person a man? A woman?* and other abyss-like questions.

There are two kinds of way of starting a «Duel».

While connected to the global net or local net and «Accelerate», the matching list will open, Burst Linkers connected in the same network that looks and selects options then pressing the duel button is one.

The second way is to wait for registrations in the matching list and charge other Burst Linkers who are waiting for duel. In simple terms, it is to do an «Intrusion»— and similar actions.

With the former, choosing a favorable partner for compatibility or personality can lead to an easy-win. However, there is point consumption at the moment of first acceleration, losing as well as draw is a balance minus. Like in existing old fashioned game centers where you meet and play fighting games, it is called «paying a hundred yen and losing».

For the latter, you can play without the points being consumed, it's generally «all odds» and judgment used to the opponent being intruded. Turning the tables is surely refreshing but, it is very tough in reality. Haruyuki who went on duels for two weeks, had a winning percentage is nearly 80 percent when intruding and had a 60 percent amount when on standby. For a newbie like him to be in an excellent number was due to partnering with the experienced and resourcefulness-rich «Cyan Pile » but, the «Flight Ability» appearing at Accel world for the first time, the support to be given by the partner became large. In fact, Silver Crow's duel opponents have somewhat become accustomed to his wings recently and as a tendency, the winning percentage is falling.

Haruyuki understood that for these reasons, the bouncer «Aqua Current » decided to choose the first match's opponent even if there will be point consumption. It is because in this battle, they absolutely must not lose. If the same leveled opponent wins, 10 points would be stolen at that moment, Haruyuki losing his life as a Burst Linker.

Hence, Haruyuki examined the matching list carefully thinking that the small chance of winning can go up if the intruded opponent are chosen but—.

In the transparent blue space «Blue World», there was the otter with hanging glasses that Karen appeared in, it also had an indistinguishable avatar gender, Haruyuki's pink pig avatar in an unworried state that glanced at the list, stretched his hand somewhere in the middle. At this point, their avatars are set to common full dive use having any other preferences diverted, the other person's gender and other information are impossible to know.

“Eh, um, h-h-he-w-w-wa-”

Haruyuki swung both of his hand hooves and eagerly interrupted. Fortunately, the otter's hand stopped just before it touched the window, red framed glasses that looked like the one from the real world was seen.

“U-Um, the matching list's level rank is ordered right? R-R-Right now Karen-san, aren't you about to choose an opponent from the middle.....?”

“I was about to, is there any problem?”

“B-B-But, around the middle is around level 3 or 4 strong people!”

Haruyuki cried gravely, Karen shrugged a shoulder and calmly replied.

“There is no merit in choosing a same leveled opponent here. Your level is 2, and because my level is 1, we should choose an opponent tag partners that at least have a total of 6 levels or above. In that way, just in case you lose, your points won't become zero.”

“T-That, theoretically may be true.....”

Murmuring stunned, Haruyuki once again remembered Takumu's words.

The legendary bouncer named «Aqua Current». With an alias «The One», the reason is while being a veteran, he still have a level of 1 —.

However, thinking about it, I wonder if such things are even possible. The level is only one, to what extent will the client be protected with such strength? Why is it roughly 1? As you level HP increases, special move, ability and

armaments can be acquired while you can freely choose a bonus for strengthening attribute. As long as you care on leaving enough points, there is no existing demerit on raising your level.....

Thinking to there till now, Haruyuki finally realized, he opened both of his eyes in astonishment.

“Um, could it be.....Karen-san, you are level 1, so when you’re on a tag the total level is low.....right? Whenever you form a tag..... the total level is always high, and when you win, the points acquired is lower, and when you lose the points lost is higher. In order to prevent it..... In other words, without knowing your face, for the sake of the newbie that are likely to be in a total loss, you stayed on being a level 1.....right.....?”

Haruyuki asking with a hoarse voice, the glasses wearing Otter’s face remained without a trace of any expression and once again moved its shoulder up and down.

“It is only half the reason. The other half... the day coming when it will be time to tell you, it may or may not come. At least, your points today to be in a total loss won’t come in an eternity”

“.....T-That’s the case.”

Once again, the twitching pig’s nose was filled up with tension, Karen again stretched her right hand to the list and spoke.

“At this point, both of our names are also registered in the matching list. But talking in about split-seconds, there still might be someone who by chance accelerates at the same time, there might be still someone to intrude to us. If that happens, your precious 1 point will be wasted”

“Ah.....y-yes indeed.”

“This tag is level 3 and 4 but, we both should know. It is not your weakness which is red lineage ranged shooter type, because there is still a considerable margin of points, we should come out head-on in this match. If you show your true ability calmly, we will surely not lose.....probably.”

—This person, really knows about me. On top of that, she’s seriously trying to help me. Why level 1, why demand the compensation of real information, what kind of motive does this contracted «Bouncer» have in the first place? I just still don’t know that..... but still..... I’ll believe. I’ll believe and fight with all strength.

If I lose, Brain Burst is lost, at least there wouldn’t be any regrets.

At this last moment, Haruyuki finally felt a modest but firmly concentrated resolve formed inside him.

Taking a deep breath and grasping both of his pig avatar’s hands tightly, Haruyuki nodded.

“I, will do my best.”

“As always. This is a battle that can’t be lost but, the important thing besides winning.....”

“Enjoy.”

Haruyuki interrupted her words, Karen merely opened her eyes a little behind her glasses. Rubbing the tips of his nose while hiding his embarrassment, Haruyuki added one thing.

“My «Parent» told me. I should enjoy all of battles from now.”

“.....Indeed.”

Slowly nodding, Aqua Current became mysterious for an instant— *Was it my imagination?* A reminiscing-like expression appeared as she touched the matching list.

“We’re starting.”

With that short word, the duel start button was pressed.

The frozen blue world and the two animal avatars vanished dissolving in light as Haruyuki’s consciousness was brought in an unknown duel stage.

Part 5

Aqua— «Water».

Current— «Flow».

Haruyuki, in this unusual straight case, could not help but think of the name given to the Burst Linker because there are many things that directly represents the avatar’s featured appearance.

The silver winged avatar, «Silver Crow», turned glancing beside him as soon as he landed on the stage and grasped a thin silhouette of a slender figure.

Crow’s height was slightly higher. There were no armor equipped in the torso and even in the slim hands and legs. Or, it might be possibly said that the whole body was the given special equipment.

It’s because Aqua Current was covered all over of freely running membrane of water from head to toe. The avatar, with a thin cable of water beside the tip of its limbs, only had the sound of flowing water from shoulder to both hands, both legs and from the chest to hips as well as having a big ascending arc drawn on its back that once again wraps at the nape of the head. To put it in another way, Karen’s armor was in an eternal loop of «Water Flow».

The water current was probably 2-3 centimeters thick which no matter what extent you strain your eyes, you wouldn’t be able to see through the avatar’s interior substance. The radiant green environment of the «Corrosion Forest» stage was caught by the water current making it have a light-green sparkle which was certainly what Takumu was talking about, «it’s not water colored but it is the color of water». Also, it’s difficult to decide whether the avatar is M-type or F-type from its figure.

Haruyuki finished observing for about two seconds and Karen’s low first tone was let out.

“Two minutes until contact. The opponent tag will come from Meidai street which is south of Ochanomizu station area.”

Even with that voice, the gender cannot be sensed because of a strong effective filter. In addition, the あの nano she uses to end her sentences when she’s on her real character disappeared. If there was an accidental real attack like colliding at the front of the restrooms from before, there would not be any reason to doubt that Karen is a woman.

“Y-Yes……they’ll come thrusting directly then.”

Haruyuki nodded and changed his thoughts as a light-blue triangle, which is the «Guide Cursor», glared on the center of his vision.

The two people were currently on a large bookstore building in the south-west corner of Surugadai-shita intersection, Jinbouchou— standing atop of a big tree.

Even the trees only have nothing but excuse due to its deformed silhouette of partly-rotting wood from the hollow trunk to stretching leaves and branches that cannot be compared to the vigorous Hardwood-trees of the «Primeval Forest» stage.

Far below was Yasukuni street from east to west and Meidai street intersecting it from north to south making it a big

intersection however, 80 percent of the ground area was covered with a poisonous purple mucus. A pot which sometimes raises bubbles, it was literally a «Poison Swamp». This Corrosion Forest stage stepped into have a poison swampland zone that carries a troublesome attribute of cutting up the health gauge.

The status of the two for the tag match was both indicated by the north-faced overlapping guide cursors. They went southward from Ochanomizu to Meidai street in a straight line with a relaxed descent. It appears that there was a grove of sick Baobab-like trees hindering but it seems like one from the tag broadly avoided the poison swamp and apparently dashed without worrying too much. The two lined-up tubes, which are the opponent tag's health gauge, on the upper-right side decreased bit by bit.

“.....C-Certainly, I feel the match just right in front.....”

While muttering, the opponent's names were finally confirmed. Level 4 «Nickel Doll» and level 3 «Sand Duct». Both of it were seen for the first time. *First, the high altitude advantage must be used to collect information or possibly, the surprise attack theory can be considered*, but Karen whispered easily betraying such expectations.

“Let's go down.”

“Y-Yes.”

Even if he didn't like what she said, he followed. The building originally have seven floors but from the tree top to the ground, it was probably 20 meters or more which the water-clad avatar advanced casually, tightly close to the vertical trunk like «flowing down». Haruyuki's eyes rounded for a while and hurriedly stepped a foot on the air.

Since the special move gauge is empty flying would be impossible but, gliding is possible with outstretched wings. Drawing a spiral with the fall, Karen arrived approximately at the same time. A place without a poison swamp was chosen to land the foot into.

Turning to face the uphill Meidai street, a heavy footstep arrived within ten seconds. It seems like at least one of them is considerably a heavyweight class. However for some reason, the guide cursor was pointing at the same direction but the second person's footstep cannot be felt.

That reason was soon identified.

The other one, which was an extra-small avatar, was sitting perched in the left shoulder of the large sports supply shop extra-large avatar with the expected height of nearly two meters that jumped out from the rotting Baobab shade.

“Thanks~ for the wait~!”

The one on the shoulder cried a cute little girl voice. The height was fairly one meter. Silver Crow's unfinished reflective armor smoothly reflected the green ambient stage. It was with a long hair part, extended skirt armor equipment and its size appearing evidently like a doll. Without a doubt, she is the level 4 «Nickel Doll».

The silver-colored doll's cheerful first words were continued after a brief pause with a little dissatisfied-like tone.

“.....is what I would like to say~, you «Intruded» us from there yet you anticipated us negligently~!, You pointlessly wasted two minutes you know~.”

“S-Sorry.....because this area's terrain is unfamiliar.....”

Haruyuki unintentionally put his hands on the back of his head and apologized making the giant, whose shoulder the doll was sitting on, gave out a severe laugh.

“fuh, Apologies are a no. While you are idly standing there, we've been destroying objects to accumulate bonus.”

“Uh-.”

Looking at the enemy's gauge again, the blue special move gauge surely charged nearly 30% without being noticed. This is a big advantage.

The giant would be the level 3 «Sand Duct» which is equipped with a rough sand-colored armor like its name. The most eye-catching was the surface of both wrists that have a large open rectangular hole. If that is the air-duct just as the name suggested, will it blow air? Or possibly, that could have the ability to suck it. In either case, caution must be in essence.

Bearing it in his mind, Karen was standing behind before I could notice and gave a small whisper.

“I'll handle Duct. You go with Doll. She can yield electric current from both of her hands. Be careful not to be grabbed.”

“Aa~, ta' heck you're spilling it~!”

The enemy shouldn't have heard that with that volume however, Nickel Doll having a good hearing cried out her resentment. Sand Duct with his foundations gravely lifted his right arm.

“As expected, «Bouncer»-dono's information skill shouldn't be taken lightly. Sorry, strategy-time has to end here.

Foooo....., it was a low growl. The blowing flow of air was felt and thinking immediately—.

“«Sand Blast»!!”

Uttering the technique name like roaring, a swirling sand-color gust fired out from the right hand's air-duct. Instincts went ahead that the poison swamp shouldn't be stepped on and even though reflex was a bit slow, he jumped greatly to the right at once. The moment he realized it, the sudden gust swallowed him from the elbow to the left arm.

“Wahhhh!”

The attack feeling like being pierced by numerous pins, he couldn't resist raising his voice. Looking at the left arm that barely escaped the wind, a part of the silver mirror armor glittered cloudy and looked like hanged sandpaper. *That wind probably contains fine sand particles which give damage to the metal armor of those who are metal-colored.* At that moment, the health gauge was shaved off by three percent.

Did the left behind Aqua Current escaped safely? Haruyuki thought as he was about to look and was surprised looking for the second time making him raise his voice.

“He-.....”

Karen, crossing both of her arms taking a defensive stance, stood upright in the sandstorm. However, there wasn't even a slight tremor in her health gauge. Exceedingly straining my eyes, damaging sand particles of Sand Duct's technique was swallowed by the water current covering Karen's body making it unable to reach the avatar body and just circulates around.

Not too long, the sand storm stopped as the giant's special move gauge was used up and Karen lowered both of her arms like nothing happened then said.

“I am unaffected by particle-originated attacks. —I can return.”

Casually putting up her right hand, the sand mixed with body's water current was gathered. A sand-mixed water formed into a thin spear on the tip of her hands and swung toward Sand Duct's left shoulder— attacking the place where Nickel Doll was sitting on.

“Kya-n!”

Doll jumped down from the shoulder having that cute, or probably unnatural, scream till now. 2-3 sand-flow spears were still aimed at the small avatar. Shouting ‘Ya-n!’ and ‘Kya-n!’, Doll was agilely evading surprisingly and avoided the ground areas dotted with poison swamp while hopping.

Haruyuki, looking at scene dumbfounded, noticed as he was taken aback. Karen was limiting her attacks to such extents intentionally so that the enemy tag will separate. In other words, my role here is to chase Doll.

—Soon, it would be useless to struggle. I haven’t forgotten that the remaining points are just seven so I’ll fight with all might. As what was always done, «Duel» with all your heart.

“WOO-!”

With that short scream, a violent 15 meter dash was aimed to Nickel Doll. The poison swamp was avoided carefully without losing sight of the enemy. And from the left side, Karen closed in with Sand Duct starting their melee combat.

Suddenly, there was countless of cheers coming from the sky one after another.

It’s the «Gallery». Before the match typically starts, opposing players’ converse with each other, loud voices are prohibited which is a standard manner so duel spectators restrained themselves till now. On those cheers, something like ‘Crow-!’ or ‘Fly-!’ were included. Even in the far-away from home Jinbouchou, there are people that know about Haruyuki.

Like being boosted by those voices, Haruyuki threw a sharp roundhouse kick to Nickel Doll who was waiting on an acquired island.

“Yan!”

The doll avatar with a height of fairly one meter, bent down to avoid the kick. However Haruyuki expected that behavior and changed the kick’s trajectory in mid-air, dropping his heels below. Doll magnificently responded evading it, but the attack hit the stretched armor-skirt’s right edge creating a dazzling spark since they both have the same metal-color characteristic and was then followed by a decrease in the health gauge.

“How cruel~!”

Though her pitiful cry resembled the voice of Haruyuki’s favorite old-generation game character, he is not in a position where he can afford to stop and bite his hands. At any rate the opponent is level 4— Just like what the master Kuroyukihime’s words, they’ve firmly exceeded the «Foremost Barrier».

“Sorry!”

Despite apologizing, both hands and feet were uninterruptedly drawn out rushed. There wasn’t any special technique besides the wing at the back making Silver Crow learn to use his light-weight speed and hard cover-armor as weapons on the past two weeks.

That said, small lightweight/metal armored Nickel Doll was completely the same. Occasional shallow attack hits scattered flashy sparks without too much damage. As I have thought, a clean-hit can’t be hoped for without doing some kind of drastic action.....

Thinking at that moment, as if anticipating Haruyuki’s impatience, Nickel Doll suddenly jumped at his chest. Haruyuki’s left hand was tightly held by a right hand and a delicate left hand with his right hand.

—Naive, I still have a head butt attack here!

On the verge of bending the sturdy helmet covering the face with all might, Karen's voice was remembered.

.....*She can produce electric current from both of her hands*.....

“—uh-!!”

Head butt was instantly suspended and Haruyuki greatly leapt back. Almost simultaneously separating both arms, *Bachii!* an intense spark surged out from the spherical parts on the center of Doll's palm. Receiving an electric current, a shock instantly ran through the whole body.

The Health gauge's loss this time was suppressed within five percent and landed beside a small island.

“-ngerous.....”

Haruyuki murmured as Doll cutely stepped ranting and shouted.

“Aan~! Escaping unfair~ly! Numbing you at great pain when I only thought of holding you up in my arms~!”

“R-Refrain please”

He bouncily shook his neck and checked both of their health gauges once again. Haruyuki still have 90 percent remaining while Doll's fell below 80 percent. The battle from the place afar have Sand Duct amounting with 80 percent while Karen, somehow was still almost full-tank. *I want to see the legendary bouncer's fight!* Thinking deeply, the opponent right before him must be taken seriously.

Nickel Doll's vertically-rolled, silver colored hair moved and her nose roughly ranged. Immediately after, the small face-mask had a coquettish smile.

“Hey~, Aren't you that~? The one that recently appeared at Shinjuku area, Full-Flight-Type-kun.”

“Y-Yeah, somewhat.....”

Nodding with precaution, the western made doll-like avatar with a more fascinated smile whispered.

“Why did you team up with «Bouncer»? Could it be~, Your points are in danger~? So~, is being a friend a N-O~? Then the point stuffs, will be lent to you as much as you like~.”

“Eh-.....”

Haruyuki stiffened involuntarily as Doll's skirt gently shook when she jumped and moved on to the same island. From there, though she was unusually walking with a *tsutsutsu-* as she approaches, she still raised a sweet voice.

“And hey~, both of us, have matching skin color~. After forming a duo, the both of us will be the rumors' hot topic won't I-T~? And me~, the truth is I don't like that sand-guy~, well he's very rough ya' know. But hey~, your skin is so, *SLIP-PE-RY* ♡”

Nickel Doll already approached right in front of his eyes without noticing, poking her left hand's index finger in Haruyuki's chest, moving as if writing a character. Feeling embarrassed, his thoughts came to a halt. *Poya-* A pale pink color dyed the left side of his vision and soon, something moved. It was Doll's right hand. The focus of the extending index finger was to gently touch Haruyuki's left-side waist.

“.....owa!”



Barely turning back as Haruyuki jumped vigorously, the fingertips from the both of Doll's hand sparked nearly at the same time. Once again, there was a momentary shock attack that took away five percent from the gauge.

Haruyuki, who moved to a further behind island, shout angered for tampering with his man's pure heart.

"S-Surprise attacks are unfair!"

The silver colored doll then laughed with a high-pitched *kyahahah* repeatedly.

"Aan~, is your man's heart hurt~? Sorry~, but being friends you~, my legion master will be offend-ed~!"

That would be true. Haruyuki belongs to «Nega Nebulas», the most wanted legion in Accel World led by the black king Black Lotus. However that is Haruyuki's greatest pride. Snappily thrusting his index finger, he shouted.

"Same here, I refuse being friends with you! Also, I'm not hurt at all! I'm absolutely not!"

Thinking of it calmly, it was like the words of a man with hurt feelings, he switched his thoughts from nothing to something and jumped. It seems Nickel Doll's playful acts stops here and with that change of expression, electricity was produced as both of her hands were brought together.

Probably those hands, the right hand is the positive pole while the left hand is the negative pole. Both hands were gripped at the same time, a large damaging electric current passed through the avatar as expected.

At an incomparable speed till now, the flash in Doll's both hands was able to catch Haruyuki. However Haruyuki pretended to evade to the right, it was something that the opponent hadn't expected— he then jumped inside a poison swamp to the left.

The knee-level purple swamp swallowed both of his legs. Doll had her back completely facing Haruyuki. Haruyuki, submerged in the swamp, extended both of his hand toward the small avatar one meter away and held its thin waist then tossed her with all might at the swamp behind with a German throw.

"Kyaaaaa!"

This time, a real shriek was raised as Doll thrust head-first in the poison swamp with splash. Fumes of unpleasant color were raised and the health gauge started to decrease bit by bit.

Nickel Doll immediately jumped to her feet and confirmed that the only nearby island was behind Haruyuki, she then shouted sharply.

"Wait, wouldn't it be the same for you? For your information, compared to the total HP amount of a level 2 like you, for a level 4 like me it's more....."

Then all of a sudden, it was silent. It seems like she finally noticed. Haruyuki being submerged in the poison swamp till now, his health gauge didn't even decrease.

Borrowing some of Aqua Current's words a while ago, Haruyuki thrust his index finger with a snap and shouted.

"A «Silver» like me unaffected by poison-!"

Just now, the Gallery above the Baobab trees from afar stirred up with an *ohh!*

Indeed. Even if it's the same metal color, its characteristics is subtly different depending on what type of metal it is. Generally, precious gold and silver metals have a special attack while base steel and iron metals are strong at physical attacks making Haruyuki, which is among the silver, to have an absolute resistance on poison. Even in the real world, silver ion that is a strong antibacterial is used in sterilizing equipments.

In this short confrontation, Nickel Doll's health gauge was gradually decreasing. Therefore, although she has the same metal color with poison resistance, her delicate armor isn't completely coupled with it. Even if Doll can par with having a melee combat inside the swamp, it's obvious that she'll run out of strength first.

".....I see. You've been avoiding the swamps for the sake of leading me in to neglect the situation without being suspected."

Looking down briefly at the purple swamp that swallows up to her waist, Doll whispered.

"As expected of being in the left end side of the «Metal Color Chart». But you know, I'll be troubled if nickel is treated as fake silver. Isn't there a variety of uses? Like how hydrogen takes up and generate power, right?"

Hearing those words at that moment, something flashed at Haruyuki's mind.

In the current year 2046, electric or **Electric Vehicle**EV are running through roads and of course, even almost the whole battery of Neuro-Linker's mobile machinery uses a lightweight/high capacity SiliconSi nanowire battery. However 20 years in the past, secondary batteries emphasizing safety were taught in science time. The name certainly is — nickel-hydrogen battery. It was like the backbone of Nickel Doll's electric attack ability.

The silver colored western doll was not even worried having the HP shaved off gradually by the poison swamp and lightly smiled.

"With that, silver has various special characteristics besides its antibacterial strength. Now, I'll teach that to you."

As soon as it was said, both of her hands were thrust into the poison swamp with a splash. The decrease in the health gauge accelerated and at the same time, the special move gauge filled up exceeding 70 percent in an instant —.

"«Anode-Cathode»!!"

The technique name echoed as it was called. A radiating light-blue spark ran through the surface of the poison swamp with a part catching up to Haruyuki giving him no time to escape.

Pachii!! A fierce impact struck him. His vision was nearly whiteout, unable to get his voice out.

".....uh!!"

There was nothing said about the avatar being stiff, instinctively, he jumped to an island behind. A white heat was in the upper left side of his vision with his health gauge grindingly shaved. Falling trapped in this situation, Haruyuki realized that his own strategy of «having a melee combat in the poison swamp» had hidden a huge risk.

The poison's so-called swamp was basically water. Being water with increasing impurities, its electrical conductivity increases. Diving into the swamp was like intentionally having yourself and the opponent be tied by wires.

However—.

Nickel Doll who also has her waist submerged wouldn't be able to escape from the electric attack's damage. Brain Burst, a full-dive type fighting game which unusually have a self-attack, in other words, getting caught up and attacking oneself was possible in this ranged attack. Doll might have thought that she will survive the same damage dealt to her HP but, adding up the damage dealt by the poison swamp at the same time will have her gauge reduced empty.

Concluding at that moment, Haruyuki looked at the opponent's health gauge while enduring the continuous electric shock. Immediately after, there was a further shock.

"Ufufu....., finally noticed?"

Doll's somewhat harsh voice clearly reached his ears.

"Exposed at the same electric current, you thought the damage was going to be bigger. After all, silver's electric resistivity is only a fourth of nickel at room temperature. Silver, **among all metals, is the best electricity conductor!**"

—geh-, that means I am the most vulnerable to electric attacks among all metal colors!?

Such things, haven't been taught on science yet! In other words I'm at fault, no, it's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology MEXT's fault! This isn't the time to think about that, something, something, something to do.....

Without taking out a voice or moving a single finger at that situation, Haruyuki rotated his brain gravely.

That special attack won't last for an eternity. At this rate, the electric attack will eventually stop and at that time, the health gauge will be almost taken. Prior to that, Doll basking herself with electricity will consume her special move gauge and have to recharge. The moment this technique stops, I'll commence once again leaving her no place to run.....

Haruyuki's HP just went below 50 percent making the gauge dyed with yellow. Seeing the special move gauge below was almost full-tank at that moment, Haruyuki finally came up with the next move.

Even if his body was paralyzed by the electric shock, Silver Crow still have a body part that only needs willpower to be operated.

".....F-flyy.....y!"

There was a thin cry from the space between his clenched teeth. *Jaka* A promising metallic sound echoed as the fold on his back instantly unfolded ten sheets of metallic fins.

"Aa-.....!"

Nickel Doll's voice was raised at the same time as a strongly vibrating wing spread out from Haruyuki's back making the wind pressure blow the surrounding water surface away. It was immediately followed by Silver Crow's rocket-like launch with a forceful takeoff. Shaking off the chasing sparks, he soared higher and higher.

AAAAA-.....!

Talks of seeing the «Flight Ability» for the first time began to stir the Gallery. Breaking off the floating green phosphorescent fog of the corrosion forest stage, Haruyuki flew. He passed through the Gallery atop the rotting Baobab and continues to rise. Finally breaking out of the forest miasma, the surroundings completely changed into a blue sky.

Flying up to this altitude, he was completely away from the ground. Receiving pouring sunlight, the silver body shone in a 180 degree turn. He then instantly changed to a nose dive.

Sharply pointing his extended right foot and using gravity as his wing's driving force, Haruyuki rushed like a laser. The compressed air was grilled to pieces as orange particles flew out of his toe. He rushed at the green miasma instantly and passed the Baobab tree top once again with the target at the tip of the guide cursor.

On a small island, Nickel Doll looked up at the sky surprised and tried to avoid by greatly jumping aside. However, Haruyuki used his arms and wings to finely tune his orbit,

"U.....AAAAA-.....!"

Together with a loud roar, his toe tips hit the top of the small enemy's shoulder magnificently.

A giant flash of explosion along with its tremor shook the entire stage.

The small island changed into a crater with a diameter of five meters in an instant. Nickel Doll was blown away in one fell swoop as a repeated tail of a high scream fly around. The health gauge with a nearly 60 percent remaining decreased below the red zone's 20 percent.

Just now, that was Silver Crow's greatest attack named «Dive Attack». In that make or break move, if it was avoided at that time the damage will be inflicted to himself because of being stiff for several seconds, so an attack directly from above out of the line of sight is nearly impossible to avoid. These two weeks, the nearly 70 percent winning percentages was hit solely because of this technique.

In the middle of the crater he made, Haruyuki raised his face while on one knee. If the force from crashing of the blown off Nickel Doll gives damage, the game might be decided here.

—However.

Two giant hands firmly caught the small avatar that was about to thrust around the middle of Surugadai-shita intersection.

It was «Sand Duct». It seems like he abandoned his fight with Aqua Current and came running to hinder Doll's crashing death. The Gallery got excited with the unexpected knight.

Duct's health gauge already fell below 50 percent and turned yellow. Speaking of Karen who was fighting him one on one, she still has not less than 90 percent. The compatibility was one-sidedly large or maybe it was a technique difference.

Aqua Current, bypassed the poison swamp from the south side of the intersection and glidingly approached Haruyuki stopping at his side. She whispered on Haruyuki's stood up ears.

“That was a good blow back there.”

“T-Thanks.”

Unintentionally shrinking his neck, Karen's words continued.

“However, it hasn't ended yet. Those two formed a combination for some kind of reason. I'm sure they'll pull out their trump card so don't lose focus.”

“Y-Yes.”

Haruyuki immediately nodded, Sand Duct was standing ten meters away with Nickel Doll on his shoulder angrily shouting.

“Maa~~ F-.....From above! «Flight Ability» is unfair, too unfair~!”

“E-Even if you say such things.....”

Unintentionally objecting, Doll merely thrust an index finger on his unnecessary reply.

“Shut it, shu~t-it! At-this rate~, we'll hit the both of you together with our ultra-gorgeous super special attack~!”

“W-Wai.....”

—*I wonder if there's such a thing in the Brain Burst system. I'm sure there's none.*

Bearing it in his thoughts while thinking, Karen said there will be a «Trump Card» no doubt. Haruyuki's health gauge had 40 percent amount remaining, the technique's scope would probably be a one hit kill. The dive attack from

before used up and consumed the special move gauge, he is unable to evade by flying. From below the waist, he concentrated on the enemy's behavior.

Nickel Doll had her right foot on Sand Duct's right shoulder and her left foot on the left shoulder then sharply shouted.

"Sandy, Let's do it!"

"Ou-!"

With a serious answer, the sand giant's giant air-ducts on both of his hands were raised and there was a roaring exchange right and left.

"Ouoouoo.....Take this, «Turbo Molecular»!!"

They called the technique name in chorus and both of the equipped turbine screws inside Duct rotated in a high speed. However, the directions of left and right are opposite. Apparently, Duct's right hand is an exhaust and is paired with his left hand which has the ability to intake.

"I see, just like what you heard from our private talk before the fight, it seems like that left hand secretly sucks and draws the nearby air."

Haruyuki nodded agreeing at Karen's murmurs. At that time, the air in the middle of Duct's hands moved with violent force. —However.

"But.....that, blowing from the right hand then sucking it with the left hand, making it to come and go.....what could it mean....."

He leaned his head as he murmured, at that time.

Duct's hands were spread with a jerk and the gap was seen with a strange haze— thinking at that moment, Haruyuki was seized by a tremendous suction power.

"Uwa-.....I-It's pulling....."

He hurriedly braced both of his foot, fighting it by all means. The small island was plowed minced, attracted to Sand Duct who was ten meters away. Aqua current was next to him. The whole body covered with water current moves little by little like being peeled off half-way.

"Ufu~n, So~, How's Sandy's «Turbo Molecular Pump»?"

Nickel Doll's triumphant voice reached the direction against the gust. It seems that the wind was intended to capture Haruyuki and Karen.

"I.....get it. The turbine of both arms kicks off gas molecules.....and is making a vacuum space."

Karen calmly analyzed as she was pulled. Haruyuki suddenly screamed.

"T-T-This is not the time for admiration! A-A-At this rate-, W-W-We'll be sucked-....."

—*Speaking of which, when I was a child, I've read a scene in a «Saiyuki» full-dive picture book. On that scene, the air was breathed in that I got so scared I cried loudly making Chiyu laugh at me.*

Haruyuki thinking of an escape by going around agitated Karen making her declare everything.

"Don't be scared. The wind power isn't an attack itself. We're only being drawn for a close quarter combat."

“Heh.....”

His sight wandered in the space spontaneously, nodding moment by moment.

Indeed, being exposed in this intense wind, both of their health gauges didn't even quiver. This technique probably is among the long-range type avatar that pulls in and brings the enemy into a close quarter combat. However, Haruyuki was a complete short-range type which Karen or Duct is overwhelmingly poor of on a one-on-one match. Going close as expected might be better.

.....Alright, if it comes to this, might as well use the wind for a jump kick.

Planning his intentions, Haruyuki began measuring the timing with his eyes seizing the unexpected.

Sand Duct continues to bring forth a vacuum with both hands— Nickel Doll standing on above his shoulder, showed a small smile. That is, the exact smile she had on the verge of trapping Haruyuki in a electric current.

Doll suddenly bent her body and touched the vacuum space made by Duct. At the same time, there was a technique name call.

“«Anode-Cathode»!!”

**Bachibachi-!* An intense spark came out from both of her small hands. Still, that technique is basically a zero range distance, without a conductor, the separated enemy wouldn't take any damage. What exactly is—.*

After that, Haruyuki saw an unbelievable scene.

From Duct's both hands, a violent vortex of spark stretched out through the vacuum space toward Haruyuki and Karen's location!

“Uh.....Ah.....!”

Haruyuki was only able to raise a scream as he was grazed. The pulling gust as well as the unmoving avatar was wrapped in a dazzling lightning. Again, his sight was in dazzling like shock. His body stiffened, unable to let out a voice.

The storm of electric current mercilessly snatched the remaining 40 percent in the health gauge. In proportion, the special move gauge was re-filled which is not enough to takeoff against the wind.....

“«Glow Discharge»”

Suddenly, Aqua Current murmured.

“Under low pressure close to vacuum, electrode breakdown occurs, making electric current flow throughout the gas body.”

“Ufufun, you know well, Bouncer-san.”

Sparks came out from both of Nickel Doll's hands as she gracefully smiled.

“This is the first debut of our ultra-gorgeous combined technique in publi~c. So~? Even without the purple hag's high-pressured arc, we're already splendidly effective right~?”

Purple aunt.....Who?

Thinking at that moment, his thoughts were blown away by angry sparks.

The combined technique in that dreadful place where the gust obstructs movement as the electric current's

damaging power passes was efficient, having an overwhelming low consumption rate on the special move gauge. If this was a single person technique, a full-gauge would only be continuously consumed for five seconds at best. However, with Duct and Doll's special move gauge, Haruyuki's few remaining HP would be devoured with a mere change left.

In the end, here— a chill ran down on Haruyuki's back.

.....I am, losing? Lost, without any points left?

However Haruyuki, sitting in despair tempted to give up like from before, gritted his teeth.

—Even if I lose, I'll lose thrusting ahead. That is, the only thing I can do now.

—Even if I have to fly above, I'll fly like from before.

Pierce through the storm of lightning, there will still be HP left even if I get hit head on. I must fly. That person, I believe I'm sure. Then.....

Fly!!

In response to Haruyuki's will, the wings at his back faintly shook, spreading—.

"It's alright."

At that time, a calm voice touched Haruyuki's hearing.

A hand was placed at his left shoulder. From its palms, transparent water current flowed into Haruyuki's body as an armor covering. *sara, sarasara*. Calmly, he was wrapped with a nostalgic streaming sound from somewhere in the world—.....

Fuh, all pain is gone.

The enemy tag's combined attack is about to end, was what he first thought of. However, it wasn't that so. Sparks of glow discharge angrily filled the vortex of vacuum as usual. Despite that electric current, it will definitely not reach Haruyuki's body. It will just pointlessly crawl, perfectly intercepted by very thin water membrane.

However— such things are,

"Impossible!"

It was a shout coming from Sand Duct who continues to create vacuum flow from both hands.

"Water should have been a conductor! Why.....Why repel electric current?"

In return, Aqua Current quietly responded.

"My water, doesn't contain any impurities, a «Theoretical Pure Water»"

"Eh.....Ah-.....!?"

As if guessing something, Nickel Doll gasped. Karen nodded and continued.

"Zero impurity water, a perfect insulator. Shocks don't affect me."

As Haruyuki repels, he confirmed the Health gauge in the upper left side of his vision. Silver Crow's gauge fell below to the bright red with 20 percent while Karen was still at the green with 90 percent left. Doll and Duct's dreadful combined technique didn't give any damage to the «Bouncer».

—Strong. She was till Level 1, but this strong.

That's impossibly a newbie. Probably, she fought in Accel World for a long period of time, long enough Haruyuki could not imagine. A Huge fighting experience, firm confidence in her «Water» attributes and creates a power that is able to blow away level difference easily.

Eventually, both of Doll and Duct's special move gauge almost ran out at the same time.

The protective water membrane from Haruyuki's body returned to Aqua Current with a *Pasha* when it reorganized as she stepped forward then spoke.

“—I was able to see what I wanted to see. It was a good technique, Doll, Duct.”

“Annoy-inggggg!”

Just now, Nickel Doll shouted with a shrill voice. Sand Duct's feet were raised up and down stomping and thrusts of index fingers were then directed at Haruyuki and Karen.

“At-once~, battle fairly without tricks! Our pure-will from this last stage, you see it- not yet~!”

“Ouu-!!”

The two big and small avatars exchanged a serious straight-thrust fist at the same time.

In response, the water-current in the armor at Aqua Current's body circulated more violently as a strong answer.

“I ask you. Let's go, Crow”

“Y-Yes!”

Haruyuki nodded and chased after Karen as he kicked the ground.

This is the final climax to look at, the surrounding people from the Gallery cheered in excitement. Along those cheers, the four persons' avatar clashed as a dazzling light and scattered sound lingered.

Everything, the heat and excitement produced by the «Duel», dissolved into a vortex as it climaxed.

Part 6

«Intruding» twice, fighting it twice.

Haruyuki's total 70 Burst Points from winning all four of his tag duels was enough for him to be restored to safety zone level.

[With this, the request is completed.]

Haruyuki's consciousness returning to the real world, there was a thought voice that echoed.

A girl with red glasses sits at the opposite side of the table with a finger extending to a white, half-clear exterior of a Neuro-Linker.

Haruyuki also followed by disconnecting the global net at the same time. From the right edge of his virtual desktop, the earth figure icon disappeared. With that, both of their names will now be removed from the Chiyoda area's matching list.

“.....Fuu.....”

Looking from the XSB cable between the both of them that glittered as it swayed, Haruyuki spat strips of his breath. The indicated time didn't pass 30 seconds since the time from the start of the first duel. However those 30 seconds was much of a time for Haruyuki who was fighting many times as a Burst Linker these two weeks. The echoes of shock from harsh hits and beatings still lingered on his whole body.

Being in a daze for about five seconds, Haruyuki raised his face in surprise and looked at his lady savior, the «Bouncer» Aqua Current's real form.

Her pupil beyond the glasses was filled with light as usual and her lips without a noticeable clear expression.

There was something I wanted to ask her which only increased since the start of the duel. But now, it is likely that I won't be able to do anything like before.

Staring curiously at the pupil of the other person from the front for more than a second, all of his thought was passed across the direct connection cable.

[.....Thank you, very much. Truly.....Thank you.....very much.]

No matter how many times he blinked to bear it, unconsciously, tears spread.

Karen looking at Haruyuki showed an extremely faint smile and whispered.

[I had fun too. Also, thanks to your hard work, I was able to see a lot of Burst-Linker's trump card.]

[Y-Yeah.....]

Indeed, Aqua Current, in the first match fought with Nickel Doll & Sand Duct, destroyed their so called «Super Special Attack» with a blade of stream from right in front of them when both of them brought in a close quarter combat. The development was the same for the preceding three duels, there was a pinch scene every time. Of course, the Bouncer at important times protects Haruyuki with confidence and strategies.

Haruyuki, reminiscing about the high thrill fight, suddenly murmured.

[.....I can't think of which is better among the trump cards used.....]

[That's pointless.]

She said, and the slightly older lady had a mysterious smile.

Thinking of those words, *Knowing Silver Crow's ability beforehand, demanding «Real Information» as compensation for the request and above all, this woman evidently has a comprehensive Burst-Linker's complete information gathered. However, the purpose can't be even imagined till now. No, in the first place, she truly being a «She» is still unsettled like before.*

Haruyuki let out his breath once more being relieved for escaping the near death situation with Aqua Current's interesting mysteries mixed in his mind. He tried throwing a bland question since proceeding with a straight to the point question might not be answered.

[Umm, come to think of it, I've heard about this from my friends accelerating from Chiyoda area. That it is very wide and in the middle of it, there's a huge *wrong area entry* battle.]

[Basically that's true.]

The inward curls of Karen's short hair swayed as she nodded and once again took a sip from her steaming Darjeeling tea.

[Still, there are a lot of schools running from Ochanomizu to Jinbouchou making it inevitable for many Burst Linkers to make it their home. Everyone's feeling in fighting at their home is the same and at Saturday afternoons, gathering to «Duel» in the neighborhood has become a customary.]

[H-Heh.....—That means, it wouldn't be strange that it is also Karen-san's home.....?]

Haruyuki just gave the question however, Karen naturally didn't answer. Instead, a calm thought of explanation continued.

[But I just chose this place today, if by chance you entered the no entry zone side run away from it.]

[Y-Yah—.....I see.....]

Greatly impressed, he let out a long sigh once again. Skillful Burst Linker such as Karen has already looked from the area selection before the fight starts.

—I couldn't be pleased just because of escaping from a pinch. I have to learn a lot from here. My Burst Linker road has just begun.....first, my partner— I have to follow and reach the level 4 Takumu.....

Thinking at that time, Haruyuki just remembered that Takumu was waiting a hamburger shop. Since it's just on the other side of the intersection, it wouldn't even take 20 minutes. Haruyuki restoring his points to safety, he wouldn't have to worry about total loss anymore for certain.

I can't ask anything and really want to know about Karen but, I have to report to Takumu first. I'm sure I'll meet Karen again. Next time, it wouldn't be a client and bouncer but simply as fellow Burst Linkers.

Thinking of that, Haruyuki took a deep breath and bowed his head once again.

[Umm, I have a friend waiting nearby. I'm sure he's worried, I'll leave soon.....—Karen-san, thank you very much for today.]

[.....You're welcome.]

Saying that, Aqua Current had her greatest smile since their collision in front of the comfort rooms. With that smile, in Haruyuki's ears— a voice continued.

[However, one more thing, there's still something I haven't taken from you.]

[Eh.....Y-Yes, what is it.....?]

Haruyuki put his elevated hips back to his seat and blankly blinked. Beyond Aqua Current's red glasses, her eyes narrowed and then whispered.

[The deferred payments of the compensation.]

Then, her lips faintly moved, reciting the accelerate command silently.

Bashiiii-! An impact sound struck Haruyuki's consciousness.

On his dim sight, a familiar series of font blazed red.

[HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER!]

The fifth duel field for today was pouring heavily with a pale light, it was the «Moonlight» stage.

The rooftop of the palace-like building was dyed with bone resembling color with Haruyuki, standing still in shock.

The Gallery didn't appear at the surrounding. It's because in here, there wasn't anything that is permitted to enter except the persons to duel, a closed «Direct Connection Duel Field».

On a bit further place, an incarnation of still standing water was dyed with the moonlight's abundant pale golden color. Scattering from both hands and legs as if arched wings from the limbs back to head, the water current raised a faint streaming sound.

The time count figure starting from 1800 going down to 1770, Haruyuki finally opened his mouth and said his words timidly.

“U-umm?.....What are the deferred payments of the compensation.....? Also, specially dueling for it is for.....?”

With water flowing in its back, a blue light slowly twinkled on its eyes once again.

“The payment, I'll steal all of your remaining points right now.....didn't you think about it?”

Her voice without the strong filter she constantly used on the four battles, it resembled Karen's natural voice in the real world. With such things in his mind, Haruyuki slowly leaned his head.

“My.....points? But didn't you just recover it.....?”

“Recovering it and at the same time gathering information, I analyzed your battle potential to steal and exhaust every root and branch. That way, I can earn multiple points efficiently than fighting in solo.”

Topon

A light water sound was raised as the avatar made a step closer.

However Haruyuki who was standing still was able put the following questions out his mouth.

“.....Even if you sat roots and branches.....can you steal 70 points in one battle.....?”

“The scary thing about direct connection duels is, being unable to remove the cable immediately. Your consciousness returning to the reality after the battle, before your arm can move to remove the Neuro-Linker cable, the opponent would have already accelerated once again.”

Topon Another step closer.

“B-But.....your failure as a guard, there wasn't even a Burst Linker that had a total loss till now.....”

“For certain «there wasn't a person with total loss among the usual duels with the Gallery around». After that, an unseen direct connection duel where the Burst Linker vanishes, why is there no talk of it?”

Trembling words came out of Aqua Current's mouth as the flow of water returning to the body hastened and she then whispered to Haruyuki.

“Now, prepare. Show me your everything.”

Immediately, a fierce pressure surged from the thin avatar making Haruyuki hold his breath.

Haruyuki had only felt this kind of pressure once. It was when he was looking at the avatar of his master and parent Kuroyukihime, «Black Lotus», at that hospital rooftop.



Still in awe, he raised both of his hands and prepared for the consequences—.

However, Haruyuki immediately lowered it loosely.

“.....Giving up?”

Still pressured, Haruyuki shook his head a little and answered Aqua Current's question.

“Umm....., a bit, closer”

Even in this situation, for some reason his consciousness was calm. He did not give up, Aqua Current's words were complete lies and cannot be trusted. Nevertheless, Haruyuki lowered his hands because of the important things inside him and whispered.

“You see.....I, from the time the first tag was fought with Karen-san.....No, before that, from the time we bumped in the comfort rooms, to you, what I'm saying is.....I believed in you. This person is a good person, this person will surely save me.”

The water current on the other side had the blue eyes twinkle once again. Staring at the light in front, Haruyuki continued to talk.

“I mean.....even if you betray me, I won't fight you with hatred. —I, a while ago, really fought with a friend who's now waiting below. The feelings we held for each other for long years..... we fought hitting each other with anger and hatred. But, at the end of the battle I believed in him, and he believed in me. At that time.....I chose. Once I believed, I'll always believe. That's because.....I believe those myself.”

Below the silver mask a small smile appeared and he took a deep breath to continue his last words.

“.....Also, me, to you, what I mean is, I.....like, you. Even as a woman, even as a man.”

Aqua Current hearing those, blinked once again— the intense pressure coming out of her body vanished.

She crossed her arms as the water current on her body integrated and murmured.

“.....Sorry. The thing from before, it's a lie.”

The moment Haruyuki heard it, even if he has believed, he still somewhat stumbled.

Somehow gaining a hold of his footing, he stared blankly at Karen for a while and asked.

“Eh.....W-Well.....why, did you?”

“Since your left defenseless in a direct connection, I felt like threatening you a bit. But I think it wasn't that effective.”

“.....No, That is, really nerve wracking deep inside.....”

Looking at the murmuring Haruyuki, Karen with her water current smiled gently at the other side— it was how it felt.

A sound of water rose as she stepped up, changed her body's direction beside Haruyuki, and looked up at the large full moon floating at the night sky. Haruyuki looking at same sky, a small voice reached his hearing.

“Important friends, I want them too.”

“.....Eh, that means.”

“.....very long ago.....even I, have companions.....and friends. Also, believing more than anyone else, cherishing the «Master».”

A secretive voice and a calm sound of water streamed and flowed. Haruyuki felt the streaming sound for a very long time.

“But something happened, and everyone became apart. The master disappears from Accel World, and every single friend, leaving only one alone as they went far away. However, I still believe. Once again, everyone will gather.....again, looking above at the beautiful night sky, the time when everyone walks together will come.....”

Suddenly—.

Haruyuki saw a vision.

Beneath a lovely starry sky, there was a lot of marching avatars. Busily talking, laughing, walking a distance without an aim.

“Ehh.....I’m sure.....that time will come.”

Haruyuki murmured, Karen gently placed her right hand on his shoulder.

She moved to the front from the left side, and also placed her left hand on the shoulder. From a very close distance, Haruyuki’s vision only had the face of the water avatar at that moment.

Aqua Current, firmly looking at Haruyuki’s eyes, had a smile and said.

“What I said earlier are mostly lies but, there’s something that’s true.”

“Eh.....W-What is it?”

“From you, I still haven’t received the deferred payment of the compensation.”

Blankly staring, Haruyuki’s whole face was drawn near as Karen whispered.

“That is, the *me* inside you. The memory of *me*.”

“Eh.....M-Memo.....ry?”

“Yes. For you and I to meet, it’s still a bit early. From here on , you must support your «Master» with your hands and do not walk one step at a time on your very long journey. Still from there, we «Elements» shouldn’t intervene.”

Haruyuki almost could not understand the meaning of Aqua Current’s words. Opening his eyes dumbfounded, the flowing transparent water and the blue eyes were filled with light.

“In the belief that someday she will draw her sword once again, that will be the time when I’ll step my foot— We will surely meet again. That’s why now, I’ll erase the *me* inside you.”

“.....B-But.....erasing my memories.....how will you do that.....?”

What came out of Aqua Current’s mouth was unbelievable. Trying to understand somewhere inside his head, the shaking light on the rustling stream covered his consciousness, flushing away his thoughts.

“I have.....I just, can do it. «People are filled with a circuit of water, all knowledge and memory that flows into this water can be passed».....That is my shin’i.”

“Shin.....i.....”

Haruyuki vaguely murmured as Karen pressed her forehead against his forehead.

The whole world was wrapped with a flow of water. Somewhere in the distance, a voice was heard.

“Then.....now, I bid farewell. Let’s meet again, Silver Crow. Your wings will lead you to the end of your journey, again, someday.....”

sarasara. sarasara. The water flowed into Haruyuki. His consciousness, thoughts and memories was filled and passed with it.

“—«Memory Leak»”

From a very far distance, the voice can still be heard. A white stream of light washed away everything— everything was drifting away.....

At the end, someone’s voice whispered softly.

Count to fifty, and open your eyes.

Part 7

.....forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven.....

With his eyelids remaining closed, he innocently counted.

.....forty-eight, forty-nine.....fifty.

He slowly opened his eyes.

There is a white round table. Similar to what was in the school lounge. On the table, there was a glass with 1/3 remaining orange juice on it. Opposite of it was an empty chair.

Haruyuki looked around blankly while twinkling his eyes.

This is a cafeteria. On the other tables, there were same-aged youngsters and elderly customers enjoying the afternoons with their paper-media books.

——I.....

—I came here to duel, requesting to be guarded by a «Bouncer»..... to restore my merely remaining Burst Points, a tag was fought..... and won.

Yes, a victory. The points went back to the 70 level. With this, there wouldn’t be any fear of total loss.

The details of the fight were mysteriously fuzzy. On the contrary, it seems to flow away trying to remember from the start.

However, Haruyuki clasped his hands and made a small guts-pose despite having mysterious thoughts.

“I will never level-up carelessly again.....”

Murmuring with a small tone, he panickedly lowered his head to avoid the surrounding suspicious gazes. With too much relief, he suddenly became hungry and drank the remaining juice from the glass in one go but it wasn’t enough.

—I’ll report this successful operation to Taku and eat hamburger.

Thinking of it, Haruyuki stood up vigorously. The management of the bookshop’s cafeteria still uses a glass-made tube where the paper bill was inserted. Picking it up to confirm, the only thing written was one orange juice for 380 yen.

He checked out at the register — only over the Neuro-Linker of course — and went down to first floor using the elevator. He came outside through the new publication corner. The cold November breeze made him shrink his neck as he crossed Surugadai-shita intersection's crosswalk when the signal light turned blue.

Takumu is waiting at a fast food shop where they will meet shortly. He ran like weaving through the crowd and was about to pass through a big automatic door. A female customer went out from inside at the same time, avoiding to the side, they passed each other. The curl of her hair that was about ten centimeters swayed on the sides with a faint drifting fragrance.

.....*sara, sarasara.*

Suddenly, Haruyuki felt like a light streaming sound was close to his ears and stopped, standing in front of the automatic door.

“Eh.....?”

Turning around, there was no flowing water naturally. The was clear and the walkways' tiles are dry.

He thought someone spilled a beverage bottle but that wasn't the case. There was an elderly with a paper bag with the bookshop's logo on it, a group of foreigners sightseeing in Jinbouchou's bookshops and a figure of a girl walking away in a quick pace which doesn't seem like someone that have the same sound he heard.

—*I guess, it's just my imagination.*

Haruyuki turned and forgot about the sound of water as he quickly entered the hamburger shop through the automatic door.

Looking at the surroundings, his best friend's waving hand, who was sitting near the window at the left side, jumped into his view.

Haruyuki then had a sense of a successful operation from his expression. Also, Haruyuki had his right-hand thumb up—.

Seeing Takumu's ordered face, which has a crumpled smile that looked like he was crying in joy, he ran in a straight line.

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Status: Incomplete Parts 8/12 done

Chapter 2 - The Farthest Sound of Waves

The Story So Far

April 2047. Arita Haruyuki, Mayuzumi Takumu and Kurashima Chiyuri are now second year students of the same class at Umesato Middle School. A few days ago Chiyuri, successfully installing Brain Burst, became Takumu's «Child» making them not just childhood friends from here on, the three vowed to go together hand in hand as Legion «Nega Nebulas» comrades.

However, the sudden appearance of the enemy «Noumi Seiji» in Umesato as a new Kendou Club member totally destroys their bond. Beating up Takumu in a Kendo match, threatening Chiyuri as he hold Haruyuki's weakness—and taking away a great power, the «Flight Ability», from Haruyuki's avatar «Silver Crow».

Unable to win, Haruyuki fell into the depths of despair. Moreover, the Legion Master Kuroyukihime was far off on a school trip in the land of Okinawa. On a lunch break of a certain day, Haruyuki clenching his teeth as he face his perfect adversity, received a long distance call from Kuroyukihime.....

Part 1

“.....I have to go now. Well then, I'm hanging up. See you.”

Ending a fast-paced talk a little while ago, Kuroyukihime lightly waved her right hand and reached for the hang-up button on her virtual desktop.

The window on the center of her vision indicating the pink pig avatar's round face vanished. Her heart was filled with loneliness afterwards and groaned to put up with it.

Walking several steps toward the roasting-hot sandy beach, she entered the shade of the Ultraviolet/InfraredUV/IR screen beach parasol and lifted a small movie camera from above the table mounted on the shaft. Almost all Neuro-Linkers now have built-in lens but, this outmoded device is dedicated for remarkably good image quality. Even if it somehow increases the trip luggage, she wanted to send HD images to him who was left at Tokyo's Sugunami district no matter what.

She turned off the camera and kept it in a small pouch. Back at the table, she sat down on the deck chair fixed below the parasol and let out a light sigh.

—I can't be like this and he also wished that I don't get dejected on the trip, alright I'll count to three and cheer up, one, two-.....

However, Kuroyukihime wasn't able to count to three. It's because she was unaware that there were two slender hands that came from behind her and of all things, she was hugged on her chest swimsuit— to be exact, she was rubbed.

“F-Fugyowaaa!?”

Jumping from the deck chair and landing as she turned to her back in the air, standing there was a girl with a one-piece type swimsuit wrapped in her body. Her short hair had a fluffy feel which matches her constant gentle smile and sweet-looking appearance. Her name is Wakamiya Megumi. Like Kuroyukihime, she was a member of Umesato Middle School Student Council with her position as the secretary.

“Me-M-M-Megumi, w-w-what was that all of a sudden!”

“Well, Hime doesn’t notice no matter how many times I call. Shortly, it will be the assembly time for the sea kayak tour.”

“Y-Yeah.....I see.....”

Sitting on the deck chair once again, she thought for a mere two seconds then shook her head.

“.....Sorry, I’m cancelling the tour. The reason.....would feeling sick be okay?”

From the virtual desktop, she pressed the «School Trip Schedule» shortcut icon, opened today’s schedule and clicked the «Sea Kayak Tour». She pressed the «Cancel Participation» button on the floating dialogue box and filled in her made-up excuse on the input reason form—

“If you put up feeling sick as a reason, following it up would be troublesome, Hime. I recommend something like «Student Council Related Business».”

Megumi grinning after what she said, Kuroyukihime suddenly had a broad smile on her lips.

“I see, preparing for other works, at least I wouldn’t be scolded with that as a benefit.”

She entered the character strings just as what she said and closed the window with a swoop of her right hand. Leaning her back on the deck chair, she exhaled a light sigh then turned her face to send her friend off— however.

Megumi, who was supposed to call Kuroyukihime for the tour option, slipped into the parasol shaft and laid her body on another deck chair installed on the right side, unintentionally blinking several times. The student council secretary aware of the gaze threw a wink forward and spoke.

“I’ll pass the sea kayak too. It has been a family rule for generations to never ride a ship without lifeboats.”

“.....Did that ancestor-sama rode a luxury passenger ship that went into a shipwreck?”

With a wry smile she reached for the cooler box above the sand, took out two bottles of chilled Shīkuwāsā juice and handed over one to Megumi at the other side.

They put it in their mouth at the same time, had a sour face at the same time, and put the bottle back on the table looking at each other at the same time— they laughed shortly at the same time.

Tuesday, 16th April 2047.

Kuroyukihime and 20 other third year students of Umesato Middle School came on a school trip to Okinawa for seven days and six nights. Today was the third day, which means, tomorrow will be the turn back point.

Selecting the itinerary from two plans beforehand, Kuroyukihime and Megumi registered for the course Naha → Henoko → Yoronotou → Naha. Currently, the spreading white sandy beach and emerald green sea right before the both of them, they were in Henoko beach that was situated in the south central part of Okinawa. Some 30 years ago, there was a large dispute on whether the Futenma American Military Base will be transferred or not and in the

end, an extra-large semi-submersible mega-float was constructed in the nearby Kinwan where they came into conclusion to move majority of the airfield facilities.

The blue sky was sometimes crossed by silver jet streams that came from taking off US military aircrafts. It has a considerably large build however, compared to the newly produced unmanned aircraft of Air Self Defense ForceASDF usually seen on Tokyo's sky, the noise was tolerable since it was on a high altitude. Her classmates from Umesato Middle School, who were frolicking on the sandy beach before, went into the sea kayak tour making the still air pocket, only come along with the returning sound of waves to reach her ears.

Having drunk some of the Shīkuwāsā juice once again, Kuroyukihime's fingertips played with the dripping droplets on the cleavage of her black bikini and lightly sighed.

—Four days left.

Particularly, even if the trip was boring, it doesn't mean I didn't want to go. I understand the objective fact that the middle school's school trip is a once in a lifetime thing, considering the little complication back home, the next real trip for the mean time may be.....or may not be the Senior High School's School trip.

*That's why, to not regret later, I must strive on filling up my Neuro-Linker's Photo/Video folder with lively memories—*and yet she understand it clearly, no matter what she'll never be in a school trip mode from the bottom of her heart. The reason is obvious. It's because of thinking of something for at least twice a day. She wants to go back to Tokyo quickly, coming back to «Him» and chatting like they always do.

And so Wakamiya Megumi, who was able to see through her evident innermost thoughts perfectly, was comfortably on the right side deck chair with her eyes closed. Kuroyukihime slowly inhaling some sea and flower fragrant air, murmured in a low voice.

“Megumi”

Megumi's eyelids opened with an *N?*, Kuroyukihime leaned her neck toward her friend and lightly lowered her head.

“Sorry. I've let the atmosphere slip..... The truth is you wanted to go kayaking right?”

“It's alright, this is work too.”

“W-Work?”

“It was written in the Umesato Middle School Student Council Duties. The secretary's jobs are ①Writing of record of proceedings and ②Help out the mood swinging vice-president.”

“L-Lies, that's a lie.”

She pouted her lips as Megumi had laughed from enjoyment then talked while looking at the distant horizon.

“It's really okay. I like using my luxurious time in a laid back way, you know that right Hime?”

— Indeed, she sits on a reserved sofa from the Student Council Room gazing at the courtyard and apart from being idle, she has a mind boggling work on publishing the Literature Club's Club Bulletin. In other words that means, Megumi, Kuroyukihime and the others, despite their association, were completely on a shutout even though they were near each other on this trip—.

“.....Sorry. Thank you, Megumi.”

Once again, she sounded a murmuring voice and continued to her thoughts.

—In a place unrelated to **that world**, to have a friend like you, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

A fierce loneliness existing in her on the surface, she's aware of that from a long time ago.

Once, in the thriving days of the foremost «Nega Nebulas», both Kurasaki Fuuko— Sky Raker and Shinomiya Utai— Ardor Maiden were around from the start together with a lot of comrades. Speaking of the time on one midnight, she was able to encounter other avatars while diving on a Legion private-use closed net made by one of the Elements «Graphite Edge» and usually, they play normal duels, sometimes on the Gallery or doing hunting quests on the Unlimited Neutral Field, a way to forget loneliness for many times.

However, on a bloody night a little two years ago, the tragic week arrived on the imperial castle and everything was lost.

She hid herself to avoid the six kings' (to be accurate, the red king's position was vacant for a while) wave of assassinations, continually isolated from the global net for two long years with a positive willpower of coming back someday, and a large portion of anxiety that the former bonds were completely severed. However, even on her last fortress in the local net of Umesato Middle School, an unidentified hunter «Cyan Pile» appeared late summer half a year ago, forcing Kuroyukihime to choose.

Release the seal on the duel avatar «Black Lotus» and repel it alone. Or else, her last remaining card— use «Copy Install Authority» and seek a fresh bond.

By choosing the former, Cyan Pile can easily be defeated and turned over with one blow. However, there was an anxiety that if Pile gives up on hunting as a result, real information can be sold to the kings which is the worst of all developments.

Eventually, Kuroyukihime bet on a one in a thousand miracle. In Umesato Middle School, she looked for a freshman student that may be suitable in installing Brain Burst and he will become her first and only Burst Linker «Child» that will divide both of their reality from Pile.

Working was extremely difficult. She accessed the school's database with her privilege as the Student Council vice-president and looked around the election ballots of whole student body, study subjects and physical education records, yet there wasn't anyone suitable to be a Burst Linker.

However one day, as she casually opened the game corner in the local net and glanced at the high scores, Kuroyukihime was amazed at the numbers she discovered. Compared to the other games— the score was literally projected in a different column. Half-convinced, Kuroyukihime challenged the «Virtual Squash» game herself and she wasn't even able to reach half of the 2,630,000 score with the handle name «HAL».

*Who on earth is this student?*and she even forgot her original aim halfway after observing the local net for two days. On one lunch break, a figure appeared on the deserted squash corner desperately curving its back, a pink pig type avatar. Indeed, certainly, the tip of Kuroyukihime's sight observing from the back of the object, the pink pig was holding a racket and hitting a somewhat gloomy ball hardly—.....

A few minutes later, Kuroyukihime saw him beat the high score again and whispered without realizing.

Eureka.

I found it.

The pink pig «HAL», the lad Arita Haruyuki, gave Kuroyukihime the confidence that the suitability check will be cleared, and the Silver colored duel avatar «Silver Crow» was generated from the depths of his heart.

Initially, she only wished for «the confirmation of the guide cursor's direction during Cyan Pile's attacks» however, he interminably exceeds expectations, clearly showing his ability and potential. No, it may rather be inevitable. It's because the lad Arita before becoming a Burst Linker, possess a huge battle experience that Kuroyukihime left

behind in Accel World forever, reaction speed.

Now, he didn't just become Kuroyukihime's only «Child» and first member of the revived Nega Nebulas, there's something that's much more undeniably precious. Compared to always being protected because of extreme vulnerability, he has the ability to raise soothing feelings that someday might pass through, reaching high the waiting far away kings' painfully aching feelings, always packed deep within their chest. It's good if it can be said as dependence. This two years, the cold water surface of «loneliness» that continues to fall in her heart disappeared because he had finally stopped it.

However that may be, Kuroyukihime still couldn't enjoy her one-week school trip from the bottom of her heart. Naturally, she saw his face on the video call a while ago and they can even come in contact with their avatars on a dive call. But their physical distance in the real world of about 1600 kilometers can be said disheartening even without thinking about it. Even without him, vulnerable to his obstinacy, she doesn't suffer her worries alone. Thinking in that kind of manner.....

“Hime's face, it's been a long time since I saw that.”

Suddenly, a whisper echoed close to her right ear as a slender finger continues to stroke her forehead, brushing her hair.

She raised her closed eyelids unaware that Megumi left the nearby deck chair and was beside her with a gentle smile.

“.....What kind of face do I have?”

She meekly asked and after a brief moment, an unexpected answer was returned.

“A *want to go back* face. Back to Tōky-, no.....somewhere, to a different world.”

“.....Megumi.”

Kuroyukihime suddenly took a small breath.

Wakamiya Megumi is not a Burst Linker, I confirmed that two years ago when we met each other and were still freshmen. Rather that, I chose to enter Umesato Middle School because of one big reason, there weren't Burst Linkers among the enrolled students or examinees. If it does so, it cannot serve a role of a «Cocoon» to hide from the six kings' assassins.

Peering into Kuroyukihime's opened eyes from about 15 centimeters, Megumi told something even more surprising.

“For Hime, I know that there is another invisible world. Probably, the real Hime may be on that «other side».”

“The real.....me.”

“Yup. Well Hime, from the time we first met, you always had a *lost child* face. Then last year's autumn.....meeting that child”

To that word, her face became fairly hot. Kuroyukihime placed the Shīkuwāsā juice that was still in her left hand to her face while Megumi, resting her chin on her hand right beside Kuroyukihime, had faintly fogged pupils and spoke.

“.....you know, me too..... I understand that kind of feeling, just a bit though.”

“.....Is that so?”

“Yeah. When I was still very small, there was a book I really like. I've read it repeatedly day by day and yet, I never

grew tired of it.....journeying in that book's world, I was able to meet new adventures. However.....before I knew it, the book was gone. Even now, I can't fully remember the title or even the writer of that book....."

Closing her lips once again, Megumi focused both of her eyes, matching Kuroyukihime's pupils and smiled a little.

"Maybe, if I enter the Literature Club, the book might be able to return in me."

"Return.....you think so?"

"Well, not-at-all."

She shook her head, laughing *ufufu* a loud. Kuroyukihime had noticed that Megumi's usual gentle smile had a touch of loneliness behind it.

"Occasionally.....really just occasionally, I try to write some image fragments that return to me but, writing and reading are different. I only remember well that the first page of that book had a charm written on it, but I've continued reading through it..... I'm sure, if I remember that charm, I wouldn't struggle getting on that book's world....."

"Megumi....."

Not knowing what words are best to reply, Kuroyukihime just mumbled. To remember completely was easy. However, she, who really knew herself, thought that she wasn't capable of spitting out cheap words about the whereabouts of that «different world» Megumi was talking about.

There was silence, but it was broken after three seconds. Megumi was smiling, this time she had her usual smile, vigorously raising her upper body and said.

"Oh no, instead of cheering up Hime, the opposite happened. We shouldn't have this gloomy shade in here."

She reached her hand for the button provided in the shaft's parasol and pressed it. The silver screen sheet rotated and coiled.

Immediately, an intense downpour of sunlight made Kuroyukihime close her eyes while Megumi, seizing the opportunity, toppled her over with both of her hands.

"Woah-, W-What are you doing?"

"Hey now, don't be violent, I'll just apply some oil on you, Hime."

"I-I can at least do that myself!"

Violently struggling, Megumi's fingertips pinned a point on her back making her unable to escape.

"And you know, it may stimulate your growth."

"Where would that be!?"

"Ufufu, isn't it obvious?"

At the same time as those words, a dripping viscous fluid splattered on her back while Megumi relentlessly strikes her with both hands continuously. Kuroyukihime, who haven't experience someone else applying sun oil on her, felt a different sensation—

"Nyuwaaaaa!"



A shriek that shouldn't be heard by the lad Arita resounded on Henoko beach.

Part 2

Three o'clock in the afternoon.

Joining the other students that came back from the sea kayak tour, Kuroyukihime and Megumi went back to the hotel at once. After using the shower, they changed into plain clothes in their shared twin room. Kuroyukihime wearing a black camisole and three-quarter-length leggings while Megumi wearing a pale yellow one-piece, they took a shopping stroll before dinner.

The reduced site of US army's Camp Schwab formerly existing in Henoko some ten years ago was now being redeveloped into a large-scale marine resort. From the hotel to the beach, multicolored shops lined up from both sides of the road making it crowded with frank southerners' confusion. On the previous era, middle school students on a school trip wouldn't be allowed to walk around without being accompanied, but with the authority of laid out social camera network, public order was highly maintained.

On this low latitude, the deep sky was blue even at this time and below it, Kuroyukihime slowly walked on the scene of exotic shops.

Students of Umesato looking for souvenirs occasionally come into sight. There was a fun racket of balancing the items and budget but, to the independent Kuroyukihime, she didn't have any necessity to buy souvenirs for her family. For now, although it was somehow volitional, tagging along with Megumi searching things for the current Student Council's first year officers was only for obligatory souvenirs.

Consequently, searching for souvenir with all might and judgment for the only person — Of course, the lad Arita — that it wasn't obligatory, as well as invested all budget for it but, the difficulty of searching for his request of a «sātā-andāgī with a diameter of 30 centimeters» was unlikely high or low. Walking around the shopping district, she would occasionally take a peek on andāgī stands and naturally, such thing isn't sold anywhere.

A «Look for yourself» somewhat hanging, she relied on looking up at the global net this time, thinking how long does those last in the first place and looking beside her, Megumi, who was cheerfully smiling, met her eyes.

Instinctively embracing her chest on the upper part of her camisole and moving backwards, she lightly cleared her throat and asked.

“..... Megumi, are you fine not looking for souvenirs?”

“Yup. I'll buy my family their souvenirs on the last day at the airport because I, unfortunately, do not have a gentleman waiting for me back at Tokyo.”

“.....O-Okay. Then.....nn..... that's right let us, maybe not. For this trip, let's buy each other a souvenir, and then we give it at each other back at school.”

The proposal out of her mouth with a profound thought, Megumi was unexpectedly taken aback with a bright look and nodded.

“That is a very splendid idea for Hime.”

“.....for me?”

Kuroyukihime strangely caught on that one part, Megumi added words unworried of the situation.

“But Hime, wouldn't that be a surprise gift? Then, we wouldn't accomplish anything shopping together. Having

different action here, after 30 minutes..... how about we meet at the hotel entrance later at 4 o'clock?"

"R-Right. Then, let's do that."

Kuroyukihime nodded while Megumi, after leaving the words 'I'll find something that will surprise Hime the most this year', immediately disappeared on the other side of the crowd. Standing somewhat shocked from her friend's unexpected response, Kuroyukihime resumed walking slowly again.

Wakamiya Megumi, excluding the relationship made with persons in Accel World, she's the closest friend she had among the students of Umesato. Two years ago, since the day she entered the school where they talked, there wasn't a single time that they fought — though she somewhat hates those too intense physical contact from her — and maintained their pleasant relationship.

However, she wouldn't want to fully step into Megumi, which was what Kuroyukihime was thinking till now. Giving an evening call or occasionally, the two of them playing around on day offs but, they haven't visited each others home even once. In Kuroyukihime's case, she lives alone in a residential town house in Asagaya not wanting to touch the reason behind it, considering Megumi this two years, Kuroyukihime has never invited her into her home.....far from it seems, they hardly talk about family or even bring it up. Kuroyukihime knowing about Megumi, living in Honchou Nakano-ku are her Mother/Father/Elder Sister which is somehow similar to her family structure.

At the end of the second semester of her sixth grade in elementary, Kuroyukihime causing an incident in the family where it was on a level far from being a «Child's Temper», made her banished from their home in Shirokanedai Minato-ku. Only an advising attorney supervising her plays the role of her guardian, Kuroyukihime was almost completely cut off of any contact with her parents.

But having those circumstances to her till now, Kuroyukihime doesn't have any basis of imagining how Megumi lives with her happy, warm and harmonious family. However, thinking about it, there was no real problem existing in her family. Founding her «Child» on last year's autumn, the lad Arita have his parents divorced, her mother, who was in custody of him, was working till late unable to come back home making him wait for the lonely evening to pass.

That is maybe why in Megumi's unfading smile, there may be a certain amount of something continuing to exist beneath it.....

Thinking of those things, she peeked at a shop's small showcase of shell work accessories on the right side of the road—

At that moment.

Bashiiii! A dry and sharp thunder struck Kuroyukihime's consciousness.

The familiar sound heard, coming from the Neuro-Linker installed BB program, was the sound marking the automatic acceleration of Kuroyukihime's consciousness by a thousand times compared to reality. In a word, someone did something to Kuroyukihime— the Burst Linker «Black Lotus» was «Intruded».

If this was in Tokyo, Kuroyukihime's consciousness sharpened up by a large combat experience would only need a lag of one second of a comma to completely switch to «Duel» mode but, she merely stiffened unable to do so now.

After all, this is Okinawa. It is the limit of Social Camera Network's ends. This here is literally a border.

At present, 99% of all Burst linkers are concentrated within the 23 Tokyo wards so there shouldn't be any challenger.....unless, it is an unexpected someone on a trip. Also, by the time they went down on Naha airport and when they passed Nagoshi by bus, she accelerated to make sure and confirmed the matching list but, she was the only one existing within the area. After dealing with the precautions, she left her Neuro-Linker connected to the global net but, in this not that big town of Henoko, an intrusion is certainly possible.

The veteran Kuroyukihime struck by surprise had the [HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER] character string bursting in flames right before her eyes, by the time the appearance of the surrounding scene began to change, her consciousness' mode change completed.

First, the street filled with tourist and shops' clerks suddenly vanished. Then, the stores at both sides transformed into a wall of piled gray rocks. This wall isn't something new, some having a collapsed part, some covered with green moss and creeping plants. At her feet, the ground was thinly covered with white gravel sand.

The creation of the stage ended and at the same time, a large blazing [FIGHT!!] font appeared bursting before her eyes then disappeared. Kuroyukihime, changed into a jet black Duel Avatar, confirmed the level of the opponent indicated in the upper-right of her vision. The figure was— 5.

“.....fuuh”

She unintentionally sighed. If somehow the figure 9 was engraved, it will be an all-out-war without minding unfairness just to survive..... and the sealed «Shin'i Skills» would once again be unleashed. Her breathing was shallow as she prepared, her sword-shaped taper-pointed toes felt the white sand piled-up in the ground.

“This is.....is this the «Old Castle» stage? However, it seems the interiors are different. Maybe it was changed to match the Okinawa area's characteristics.....”

She was lightly muttering, as if someone heard her talking to herself—.

“It's not «Old Castle» ya'-know! This here is «Gusuku» stage ya'-know!”

And, a powerful speech came from the upper part of the slope on the right side. Raising her face there were two standing figures appearing above the gray castle walls as seen with the evening sky, no, it was avatars' shadows that she saw.

From the front, reminiscent of the green sea color, a blue colored armor came out. Behind it, a bright coral colored armor was standing. Both of it had the curves and design of FFemale type avatars.

Since the opponent didn't immediately charge ahead, Kuroyukihime took a glimpse at the upper-right corner of her vision. She once again confirmed the avatar name indicated below the enemy's health gauge. She read «Lagoon Dolphin LV.5», it was likely the sea colored avatar's name. Since it's a one on one duel, the coral colored avatar is supposed to be in the Gallery. At present, there is no information known about her name and level but, there is one little thing that is for sure. The gallery cannot be within a ten meter radius on normal duels however, the coral colored and the sea colored are close to each other meaning, those two are either «Parent and Child» or legion members— or even both.

“Hmm.....”

At the time Kuroyukihime let out a small voice, the sea colored Lagoon Dolphin forcefully jumped off from castle to the road. It was a height of five meters, even with a bad landing, there wouldn't be any falling damage as all of her joints would absorb and minimize the impact to the body.

“Wah- H-Hold it~, Ruka-chan!”

The left behind coral colored avatar on the castle wall raising a somewhat miserable voice, jumped *Eiya* from the edge at the last minute after hesitating for many times. Don't come here! It was a grand fall, her health gauge doesn't exist since she was originally a spectator. Looking at the coral colored avatar patting his butt as she stood up, Dolphin shook her head and said.

“FuraStupid. You should have just waited up there.”

“W-Well. Ruka-chan that’s too absurd ya’ know.....”

“KashimashiShut it! I’m just trying this of course!”

*The coral colored avatar had a southern accent but she still uses standard Japanese however, Dolphin’s words are core Okinawan dialect, it seems suspicious.....*Kuroyukihime thought and at that time. The coral colored avatar put her hands on Dolphin’s shoulder and talked in a low volume.

“Well ya’ know Ruka-chan, you’ve been using Okinawan DialectUchina-guchi for a while now, that person wouldn’t understand anything~. Now, the true purpose.....”

“.....Aa- nah-, enough!”

Shouting a voice, Dolphin took a big step on the white sand road, thrusting her right hand’s index finger to Kuroyukihime, finally giving a somehow understandable language.

“Hey ya’, you’re a student on a trip staying at that hotel!”

Kuroyukihime taking a glance behind her, the resort hotel where the Umesato student stays that changed into a huge stone pile ruin came to her sight. Turning back to Dolphin again, she answered the question with a nod.

“.....Come to think of it, you two are not travelers..... aren’t you resident Burst Linkers of this land?”

“Ryt-O.....I mean, that’s right! I am our ancestor’s Okinawan PeopleUchina-chu for generations.”

“Ah, M-Me too ya’ know.”

The coral colored avatar behind Dolphin was seen raising her hand, Kuroyukihime pondered.

The required program to be a Burst Linker, «Brain Burst 2039», eight years ago in the year 2039, it was distributed to a hundred elementary students living at the center of Tokyo metropolitan area. With the condition of being directly connected by cable for a copy install, new programs were acquired by the children but, it was inevitable that it was only restricted to those who are living within the 23 wards. Kuroyukihime, who was playing for seven years, never knew any Burst Linker who was living outside the city center.

However, speaking of possibility, a Burst Linker that once lived in Tokyo..... migrating to Okinawa and Hokkaidō is possible. After all, even if that person is a high level veteran, being an elementary or middle school student in the real world, that person couldn’t be self-supporting. A parent’s job transfer or divorce may lead to a change of residence situation which cannot be avoided. Also, a Burst Linker going in Accel World’s remote region, will meet his «Gradual Downfall» without exception—— and that’s what Kuroyukihime thought so far. At any rate, the other person cannot duel alone, take for example diving into the Unlimited Neutral Field if you reached level 4, independently hunting enemies wouldn’t possibly be stable. The points must be supplied and if the remaining balance held from Tokyo was used up, forced uninstall was the evident result.

However, the sea and coral colored avatars standing before her eyes was born and raised in Okinawa.

There are two theories that may explain their existence. A Burst Linker from Tokyo that changed residence to Okinawa made a «Child» in this area and gave his own points, raising his child to a level where they can hunt enemies..... or, on the year 2039, BB program wasn’t just distributed on the center of Tokyo metropolitan area. I couldn’t help but to be piqued whichever it may be.

“.....Interesting.”

The sharp-eared Lagoon Dolphin heard Kuroyukihime’s unconsciously spilled murmurs and to top it off, she misunderstood its implications.

“Oh-, That’s the spirit! ‘Kay~ Ta’ match will be decided with my one blow!”

The coral colored avatar behind her shook his hands and stepped back as she spread her foot, lowered his back and put up her hands. The blue lineage avatar surely having a daring hitting form, even the sea breeze around seems to blow some of her fighting spirit while Kuroyukihime, suddenly had a smile below her mirror goggles. Even if they had different meanings aside from before, it’s still interesting, it was another long silence as she talked to herself.

Kuroyukihime, having her stance in front her opponent for the start of the duel, suddenly had her left-arm blade and her right-arm blade halfway near her chest. Then something was felt, the coral colored avatar separated for more than ten meters away had both of her hands near her mouth and shouted.

“B-Be careful, Ruka-chan~! Your opponent is level 9 ya’ know!”

“Heh-, it doesn’t matter! It’s only two from master’s are there, and nothing else!”

On the way they talked, *hmm* she started thinking once again. *It seems like those two doesn’t know what «Level 9» in Accel World means. It is not merely «two levels above Level 7». It is bounded to a cruel Sudden Death Rule, as that who carries it bears the title of a «King».....*

Her thoughts were led astray so she took a breath to get back. The moment you step on stage, the only thing on your mind should be nothing but «Duel».

“That’s right, levels are just numbers. Come and give it your all.”

It was a sharp question, Lagoon Dolphin’s smooth, streamlined eye-lens strongly shined.

“Ya’ don’t have to tell me!”

She deeply stepped on the ground making the white sand violently soar. Afterwards, she shortened a nearly seven meter distance like instantaneously gliding. This cannot be simply made by specifying on an avatar’s rushing power.

It is a proof of training where a smooth attack can be obviously connected from the dash.

“Haa!”

Along with a yell, she shot a halfway thrust on the right. From her back to her shoulder, the energy of her fist handing down a twisting motion, made an air vortex to be seen. If the speed was to be compared, it was unnecessary like Kuroyukihime’s «Child» and her favorite pet Silver Crow’s punch, for its weight was slightly heavier.

And so to say—.

Defending against that great fist-thrust, they both had damage with the opponent having a big one while Kuroyukihime having a light one.

However, the punch’s trajectory made her left-arm blade to be raised. An avatar that is an embodiment of an «Absolute Cutting Property», the blade Limbs of Black Lotus will ripped cut any armor no matter how tough or thick it may be. Before, There were only three person that was able to repel Lotus’ blades that were the only weapon and armor equipped on her body, the «Anomalous» one among the «Elements» Graphite Edge of the former Nega Nebulas, the legendary berserker «Armor of Catastrophe» Chrome Disaster, and the «Invulnerable» Green Grande.

If Lagoon Dolphin’s right great fist-thrust somehow collided with Kuroyukihime’s blade, her fist would have been split in half and she would lose her right arm up to her shoulder in a swoop.

However, Kuroyukihime didn’t go that far, she received the powerful strike with the side of her left-arm blade instead.

The cutting portion of Black Lotus' four blades equipped with an absolute cutting power comes with a frail lateral rigid portion as a price. When her level was still low, the blades' sides always broke after being hit for many times. To cover that weakness, the young Kuroyukihime spent a long period of time in the unlimited field, training to the ends and came up of a technique where she spins the opponent's attack in a spiral motion, the so-called counter-attack hits by turning the vector power around— it was named «Soft Act».

By the time Dolphin's great fist-thrust grazed the blade, small sparks were produced and then swallowed by a jet black vortex—.

“Fuu-!”

With Kuroyukihime's short force, she repelled with a 180 degree turn. The small lightweight avatar was unable to stay at her place, her body was blown off for more than five meters and her back hit the ground.

“Aga! Ouch!”

Letting out a small shriek, she immediately raised both of her leg, kicking to get up and considerably able to keep her cool. Her HP gauge decreasing by more than ten percent, she once again charged without minding the situation.

“—Seyaa-!”

A much furious yell was sent out along with the right fist's great fist-thrust. The technique was once again completely defended and it was repeated by switching right with left, *This shouldn't be underestimated even a little.....* Kuroyukihime thought to herself as the «Soft Act» was sustained again, at that time.

Dolphin's body quickly lowered, the body's axis started rotating and in that spin moment, her right foot let off a very low roundhouse kick. A feint thrust of water surface kick was seen. Judging the attack that made Black Lotus' limbs, all of her blades, taking a unique form of «a weak body balance», it was good in a sense. The white sand was blown off as the kick approaches and she jumped to avoid it. Saying that the left-leg blade's side was directly hit, although it wouldn't broke, it was possible for her to stumble. And unfortunately, she was still halfway studying on how to use «Soft Act» on her legs.

Her left leg twisted 90 degrees outward, Dolphin's kick would hit Black Lotus' blade limbs— yet there's still a passive ability named «Terminated Sword» that she can collide it with, the techniques' power amputates a limb without any regard. However, Kuroyukihime didn't choose that defense method, but in return—

“Fuun-!”

A sharp yell and a downward thrust below her left-leg blade were launched at same time. A stiff feedback, along with an unpleasant foot response, her blade pierced to the stage's ground up to her knee.

Subsequently, Dolphin's water surface kick slammed to the exterior of the calf portion of Kuroyukihime's left leg. This time, a violent impact occurred, the piled-up fine sand at the «Gusuku» stage was blown away for more than a three meter radius.

Lagoon Dolphin's kick hiding a magnificent power, Kuroyukihime's left-leg fractured, and on the contrary, she was unable to move for even a centimeter. With her blade deeply buried, all the kick's power was absorbed by the ground making it an immobile stake.

“.....YukushassaYou've got to be kidding me.....”

The water colored eye-lens opened dumbfounded while Dolphin, retrieving her kicking foot, slowly retreated and whispered further.

“A hole, ta’ duel field was drilled.....”

If you look at it, the coral colored avatar that was looking from a very far place had a surprised expression with both of her hands covering her mouth.

At most, it was only a leg that was pierced to the ground yet there is a reason why those girls are surprised. Almost all of the general duel field’s terrain objects — buildings, natural objects and decorations — can be destroyed for the purpose of collecting bonus items in charging up the special move gauge however, only the ground was not restricted to that. The field’s intervening power for the «ground’s destruction» is too large and without the very thing itself, there wouldn’t be any duels making it basically impossible, except for some stage-specific properties. Those some, take for example the «Ice and Snow» stage with the ground covered with ice which can be melted by heat attacks and the «Corrosion Forest» stage with poison swamps that can be evaporated, still have an inviolable real ground below the ice and swamp. Even in this «Gusuku» stage, a three centimeter pile of white sand covering the ground to be blown off before the indestructible stone-paved ground below it could appear— was supposed to be there, however where Kuroyukihime currently stands, the left-leg blade was simply forced and the stone pavement was pierced by more than 50 centimeters.

This is also an embodiment of the «Black King» Black Lotus’ «Absolute Cutting Property» power, a veteran from central Tokyo who still surprises Burst Linkers till now. However, those two who were raised on Okinawa probably doesn’t even know someone like Kuroyukihime. Retrieving the left-leg blade from the ground without a sound, the jet black avatar stands again as Dolphin and the far away coral colored avatar gazed absentmindedly.

“Now then..... I’ll be the one attacking next, shall we still continue? Or possibly, you’re still hesitating for a draw.”

Kuroyukihime speaking, near the mouth of the coral colored avatar, her fists were used as a megaphone and shouted.

“T-That’s enough already, Ruka-chan~! Let this person be~!”

Perhaps, that was what this Blue lineaged, F-type avatar’s short nickname for DolphinRuka who was standing there for several seconds and before long, she shook her head and forcefully slammed her right foot on the ground.

“.....Not yet! As an Uchina-busaOkinawan Warrior, I won’t lose to a mainland Samurai!!”

Those powerful obscure words partly had a good reason making Kuroyukihime lightly tilt her head.

“.....isn’t «Bushi» and «Samurai» not much different?”

“It does! A BusaBushi— fights by hand!!”

And so, Dolphin retorting for the third time, the coral colored avatar’s comments passed.

“Umm~, ta’ hands said, it’s Karate ya’ know~!”

“I see.....I understand. So the technique you used was Karate.”

Murmuring, Kuroyukihime had half of her body take an intercepting stance. With the remaining time, both of their Health gauge was still on a great margin, she had an intuition that this will be the duel’s climax and murmured.

Kicking up the sand as Dolphin close in, she put her arms beside her and draw it back to its limits. Her fist making a stiff grip, it shined a bright marine blue light. The thrust coming from more than a meter away, she lowered her back and tensioned her chest—

“—«Tidal Wave»!!”

At the same time the special name was called, an attack shot from both of her fist.

The barrage speed and force was like of double-barreled cannon. Having a sea color light effect for more than five times a second, the far, double wave rush of the common technique was heard along with it. Any enemy and any armor can be crushed by those fists along with her obstinate yell, it was a good technique.

However, Kuroyukihime also started to act the moment the fast approaching attack begun.

She raised her right knee up high, the tip of her left foot was used as a fulcrum to turn to the left. She paralleled her upper body to the ground and dropped the right-leg blade facing the duel opponent.

Stretching her right leg, she uttered the technique name—.

“«Death By Barraging»”

The one-shot speed and power of the side kick may be something that the opponent hasn't seen before.

However, the next moment. The right-leg blade entirely had an intense blue-violet radiance and then, it went out.

No, it didn't go out. It split countless into a blur. The haze on the blade's tip spread into a cone, it can be said that a knife was shot out from a shotgun. Black Lotus' level 4 special move «Death By Barraging» is a side kick technique that can be drawn on either left or right leg-blade with a 3 seconds X 100 hit per second rate. Anyone caught within the sphere of range will be seen horribly poured with infinite body of dense swords.

That said, the moment the special move was triggered, Lagoon Dolphin didn't have any room to stop and evade, seeming that it wasn't in her plan.

“See.....RYAA!!”

The girl's innocence and warrior's spirit didn't contradict as it coexisted within the roar she gave off, the high speed consecutive thrust on left and right were sent out within the edge of Kuroyukihime's blade thrusts. Her blue fist wearing a blue-green base turned into blue-violet as it touched the blade, at that instant.

A pile of pure white flashes was produced on the attacks.

If it was the power of each blow done by the fists and blades, Dolphin's part might have exceeded. «Death By Barraging», unlike Lotus' one-hit-kill level 5 special move «Death By Piercing» and level 8 special move «Death By Embracing» techniques, the barrage style technique focuses on range and number of hits.

However, the number of consecutive attacks was way too different. Even if the marine blue fist completely countered, there were still ten blade hits and from the front, the Karate user's body caught the thrusts—

“UWAAA—————!!”

BAKKANN!! A shriek and a very loud collision sound remained as Dolphin was whorled up very high. At the part where numerous shots were fired, orange sparks scattered as she reached the top of the parabola, then spin as she fall. *Her health gauge suddenly dropped to a small quantity of less than ten percent, with her head about to stick on the ground, there was nothing else to be blown off.....*Kuroyukihime judged, and she pulled her right leg back and dashed

She pointed her left-arm blade toward Dolphin's landing spot. Laying down the side of the blade, the «Soft Act» technique was used to break the fall's momentum as she touched the streamlined head at that moment. At the same time, her body turned 180 degrees and her feet were lowered to the ground.

“.....”

Lagoon Dolphin, who seemed to not understand why she was still alive for a while, eventually shook her head bouncily and immediately saw Kuroyukihime right before her eyes—.

“.....I give up!!”

On something that wasn't usually seen on Tokyo's duel scene, Kuroyukihime unconsciously had a simple smile and nodded.

“Un, it was a nice fight. On those two attacks, the first kick was good. It could have been better if you were able to connect the feint smoothly.”

“Osu!Alright! Let's train again, Elder-sisterNeenee!”

Shouting once again, she stood up, crossed her arm and bow. Kuroyukihime is a neenee? Twisting her neck, she took several steps back raising her fist to her chest, waiting for the final blow for herself.....

“Wah- H-Hold it, Ruka-chan! We still haven't talked about the important part!”

A shouting voice coming ten meters from behind, Lagoon Dolphin suddenly stopped her hands. Seeing the coral colored avatar when she turned, she once again turned around to Kuroyukihime and lightly hit her own head with her hanging fist.

“Aiya!Oh my! I completely forgot!”

This is much more shocking, now that it was mentioned she remembered. On the beginning of the duel, the coral colored avatar said some mysterious words for a few times. ‘The true purpose’, ‘let this person be’ and ‘important talk’. In other words, those two girls, instead of intruding Kuroyukihime, they were simply looking for a fresh fight—and besides the fight, there was some hidden goal in it.

Watching over, Lagoon Dolphin with one knee on the ground again and raised her water colored eye-lens directly at Kuroyukihime then shouted.

“Neenee! With the skill that I showed, I beseech you! Please listen to what our words are!”

“That.....well, if I just had to listen then I'll listen.....”

Confirming the time count at upper part of her vision, the duel ending with only three encounters, there were still nearly 20 minutes left. That would be enough for a talk.....

And so Kuroyukihime's judgment was once again betrayed by the two intruders.

“Nifeedeebiru!!Thank you very much!!”

From that shouting voice, Lagoon Dolphin's words unexpectedly continued.

“Well then Neenee, if ya' turn back and walk for a minute, there is a tea house called «Sabani» on the corner of this shopping district, let's meet at the table in the store front!”

“.....Wa...eh...?”

The thing right before her eyes was the greatest surprise for Kuroyukihime in this duel— Dolphin raised her right fist to her head this time, and punched her chest plate without any hesitation. The merely remaining health gauge was blown off, the blue splashing waves along the avatar disappeared.

It was really splendid as it scattered, Kuroyukihime saw the blazing [YOU WIN] characters and spoke once again.

“Meeting.....in reality?”

A reply came from the far away place where the coral colored avatar was waving her hands, with her feet already vanished ahead.

“Yes it is ya’ know! Let’s meet there, Onee-sama~!”

And immediately, the duel ended.

Part 3

Kuroyukihime returning in the real world, she was still staring at the accessory shop’s showcase she was peeking at just before the duel started. However, the cute multi-colored shells manufactured into earrings and pendants weren’t coming into her view.

All of her thoughts were focused on thinking, *Is this an intricate trap?*— and something along the line.

A Burst Linker’s greatest taboo is obviously, «Reality Break». Face, name, home and school affiliation in the real world, those are the private information that will be known by other Burst Linkers. And in due time, it can lead to the worst possible outcome of physical attackers committing real attacks. Those deceitful Burst Linkers will threaten the physical body of helpless elementary and middle school students with real violence while in the background and in most cases, they’re unable to resist at all. The ultimate accelerate command «Physical Full Burst» that was given to level 9 Burst Linkers bound to the sudden death rule was Kuroyukihime’s only «way of opposing real attacks».....though she didn’t consider it.

In any case, a Burst Linker must be enough to protect such a thing like real information— they should be able to. However a few minutes ago, Lagoon Dolphin and the coral colored avatar whose name was still unknown were completely calm when they spoke about meeting in the real world. It was as if they haven’t heard of the words «Reality Break» even once.

Even within the duel, isn’t it possible for both of their words and actions to be just a clever act? Knowing that Kuroyukihime is the «Black King» Black Lotus, wouldn’t real information be inquired?

Her instinct tells her that those girls aren’t two-faced but simply naive Burst Linkers, it’s just that they truly enjoy the «Duel»’s game play. Also, she had a strong feeling that she should just believe.

However, with Kuroyukihime’s position now, she absolutely wouldn’t allow herself to leave because of a mistake leading to a total loss. With the black legion «Nega Nebulas» slowly reforming, the temporary revolt of the six kings of pure color will be overturned.

And more importantly— looking at a corner within Umesato local net, there was the only lad who was her first and last «Child». The dazzling silver wing spreading, someday flapping to the unreachable height of Kuroyukihime and the other kings, now that he’s halfway through, he’ll absolutely.....

An intense hesitation suddenly shook her body at that time, unexpectedly, a hand gently touched her right shoulder — it was how she felt. At the same time, a voice faintly whispered near her ears.

.....Senpai, believe in your instincts. Believe in yourself..... that’s the important thing you taught me didn’t you, senpai?

“.....Fuh.....——that’s right, Haruyuki-kun.”

Without letting out a voice, Kuroyukihime whispered with her left hand strongly holding her right shoulder, and as she straightened her back, she changed her body’s direction.

The place Dolphin designated was immediately found. At the crossroad they pointed while on the duel stage, Kuroyukihime saw a raised boat like sign of an open cafe and still maintained her minimum caution as she approached from the other side of the road. *The store name was written with paint on the sign and certainly read as «Sabani». If I remember correctly, it means small ship in Okinawan dialect.*

Hiding on the storefront of a souvenir shop opposite the intersection, she looked at «Sabani»'s open terrace. Two of the three lined-up tables were empty, on the other one— two girls were sitting side by side.

“.....is it them?.....”

Sighing involuntarily, she did a one last check to make sure. If this was a series of intricate trap incidents that the two girls sitting in there wasn't Burst Linkers but a «Decoy», the real one might be observing the terrace deck from an unknown place in the surrounding area. In that case, the real one would naturally be connected at the global net. Leaving it at the matching list, the moment Kuroyukihime notice that it was a decoy and accelerate, she wouldn't be able to counter attack and prevent it.

“Burst Link”

Lightly reciting the acceleration command, the surrounding buildings and shoppers turned frozen blue. Kuroyukihime stepping into the «Blue WorldInitial Acceleration Space» with her black swallowtail butterfly avatar, opened the «BB console» from an icon on her virtual desktop and displayed the matching list. The lined-up names were— three. One is her Black Lotusown name, while the other names seen were level 5 «Lagoon Dolphin» and level 4 «Coral Merrow».

“.....Coral MerrowCoral reef mermaid..... I see.”

From the name, she was the Coral Pinkcoral colored avatar calling Dolphin «Ruka-chan» on the gallery from the previous duel without a doubt. In other words, the fact that those two were still registered in the matching list even after the duel.....that means.

“The only thing left is.....to believe, I think.”

Whispering, Kuroyukihime lightly recited the «Burst Out» command.

Climbing the stairs to the open terrace of «Sabani» shop, her low-heeled mules sounded as she step towards the innermost table making the two girls biting their straws raise their heads.

Their ages looked like one or two year younger than Kuroyukihime. On that fine scorching day, an absentminded expression floated on their childish faces. Kuroyukihime, stiffened until now, reluctantly sat facing the two of them.

Without any delay, 'Welcome!Mensooree!' the store clerk jumped from inside the shop putting a cool drink and a wet towel on the table. At the same time, a menu was displayed in a holographic window through the ad-hoc connection, she ordered a fresh pineapple juice. The store clerk vigorously shouting 'Fresh pine for one!', a 'Fresh pine right away!' reply returned from inside the store and a freshly squeezed fruit juice was poured on a large-sized glass from a groaning old style mixer, as it was brought back to table, *Kachin!* Kuroyukihime's Neuro-Linker showed a price of 280 yen and the same amount was taken from her—.

After most of those sequences had ended, the two girls still only have nothing but opened eyes and mouth.

Kuroyukihime with a straw on her mouth tasted a sip of the fresh pineapple fruit juice then slowly said.

“.....I thought, you guys have called me.”

Both of them immediately blinked fast, they blurted 'Ah!' and humming nodded. As soon as the unison ended, the taller girl on the right side scratched her reddish brown short hair and said.

“WaasaibiinSorry..... umm, Neenee, you're such a churakaagii.....”

Then finally, the girl with the ponytail sitting on the left side opened her mouth.

“U-umm, churakaagii means «Beautiful».”

“For me, I thought that ta’ only Burst Linker from ta’ mainland was our master, it was really surprising.....”

With that frank attitude, the few percentage of wariness left in Kuroyukihime was replaced by a light smile. With her mouth about to open, she first whispered to the shortcut deep-tanned girl with a small voice.

“Are you Lagoon Dolphin?”

“Ah, Y-Yes!”

Then, she continued to the light-tanned ponytailed girl,

“And so you are Coral Merrow.”

“Y-Yes, that’s right.....b-but I haven’t gave my name to onee-sama yet.....”

Merrow had a really surprised face, quickly spoiling ‘I looked at the matching list before I came here’ made the girls raised a *Hoo* voice for saying something strange.

“I see now. As for me, I think of onee-sama as a High-Bornsaadagaumari.....”

“S-Saadaga.....?”

Kuroyukihime blinking, Lagoon Dolphin commented.

“With ta’ blood of Yuta. She is one too ya’ know.”

Apparently, she somehow remembered the word Yuta from her vocabulary. She happened to loosely read it at an Okinawa guide book while on the plane. To be exact, it was a word that means folk shaman. Naturally, Kuroyukihime don’t have such powers but, believing in Dolphins words, that’s Merrow’s talent.....

The seated ponytailed girl tilted to the left staring at the scene, she hurriedly restored her thoughts.

Their master, in other words their «Parent», was really from mainland— equals Tokyo, a Burst Linker that changed residence. Without any other person to duel in this land, a «Child» was made and trained up to level 4 and 5. That means, it was no doubt a veteran that possessed a massive amount of points. Apart from those two, the alleged master should still be kept precaution with.

As Kuroyukihime sipped some raw juice once again, the two girls who seems to have taken back their composure, exchanged glances and nods. Straightening her back, Lagoon Dolphin who was sitting on the right as seen from Kuroyukihime’s view, opened her mouth.

“U-Umm, I’m from Kube Middle School second year class two, Asato Ruka!”

Coral Merrow following it,

“U-Umm, I’m also from Kube Middle School, first year class three Itosu Mana!”

They said ‘Pleased to meet you!’ and lowered their heads at the same time, *Buu* Kuroyukihime blew the remaining small amount of pineapple fruit juice on her mouth. Wiping her lips, she hurriedly interrupted the two.

“.....W-Wait, stop. Hold it!”



“Yes?”

With Dolphin’s large black pupils mysteriously opening, she confirmed whether if It couldn’t certainly be what she was thinking.

“.....Just now, was that your real names?”

“Of course it is~!”

The reply came from Merrow who was also staring blankly. Kuroyukihime touched her right temple with a finger and timidly asked.

“.....That means, within the duel before, the «Ruka-chan» nickname Merrow-kun used to call Dolphin-kun wasn’t a shortcut for Iruka.....but her real name instead, am I right.....?”

“Absolutely, of course it is~. Similarly for Ruka-chan, she calls me «Mana». She was just born three months ahead of me, she can’t suddenly be like an onee-san.”

Immediately after saying that, Dolphin— Ruka, lightly pushed the base of Merrow— Mana’s ponytail. ‘Ouch!Aga!’ A small voice was put out, Mana had a bitter face and her eyes darkened while Ruka, feigned ignorance and sip a deep colored juice.

Smiling once again from those two’s situation, Kuroyukihime hurriedly strained the mood. After clearing her throat, she asked further.

“Well, right. Your master, both of you somehow.....I think that some rules concerning «Brain Burst» should have been told to you.....”

Actually, this conversation should have been made through direct connection. However, it is somewhat outrageous to think that these two are used to thought voices, also, the XSB cable was left in the hotel room. Without somehow concealing the voice, the reason wouldn’t be conveyed to these girls.

Ruka and Mana having a puzzled face at that moment, they soon nodded. Looking at each other’s face, they used a ‘one-two!’ rhythm—.

“”First~, don’t use «Acceleration» on bad things!””

“”Second~, don’t recklessly speak of «Acceleration»!””

Saying in chorus with a ringing volume, Kuroyukihime hurriedly persuaded them to lower their voices making them close their mouth tightly. Leaning above the table, she surprisingly confirmed.

“.....is that it?”

“Yes! That was it~!”

“.....”

Kuroyukihime silently sat back on her seat, she sipped some pineapple juice once again and exhaled.

In other words, their «Master».....a proficient Burst Linker coming from Tokyo knowing that there are many risks «Brain Burst» will bring but nearly didn’t discuss about. «In order to prevent Reality Break, you must not call out real names while on the duel stage». Tokyo Burst Linkers, even level 1 newbie, should know this great principle.

“Well.....it seems like I would have to say a few necessary words with your «Master».....”

Kuroyukihime was so dizzy she almost fell unconscious—.

Ruka and Mana looked at each other's face for some reason and at the same time, they wore a bright smile.

"I-Is that true? Neenee! I'm glad, I've been wondering how I would ask that~!"

"Wha.....What?"

Suddenly backing out due to Ruka's unexpected words, Mana with a full bloom smile commented.

"We, like onee-sama, want you to meet our master~!"

Continuing for five minutes, Kuroyukihime somehow heard most of the situation from those two and goes something like the following.

First, Okinawa— Nago/Henoko area rather, have three Burst Linkers existing in the area. Just as what Kuroyukihime expected, their «Master» was a transfer student from Tokyo and had Lagoon Dolphin Asato Ruka as a «Child» then, she had Coral Merrowltosu Mana as a «Child». Mana seems to not have yet used her copy install authority.

It would be nice to say that this is a little miracle. With the strict necessary conditions for being a Burst Linker and it cannot be checked prior on doing so, there are no more second chances if someone fails to give a copy of BB program. From their «Master» to Ruka, from Ruka to Mana, the possibility of the link not to be interrupted was considerably low. From now, Mana giving it next to someone, and then again.....the chain continuing without fail, Kuroyukihime has favored that this unrealizable «Acceleration Community outside Tokyo» might be possible to be born in this land of Okinawa.

—That seems to be what Ruka and the others have dreamed for recently.

However, that «Dream» was shattered by an incident.....a trouble that occurred this year.

Their «Master» tried to challenge it at first and almost gave up after over a few months now, having a negligent attitude. Ruka and Mana searched for Burst Linkers among the teenagers that came from Tokyo staying at Henoko resort at the very moment the season for school trip started, assessing their abilities by continuously challenging them. They were searching for someone that is able to forcibly open-up their master's unmotivated eyes—.

Kuroyukihime listened till there while groaning *uumu*, she then asked a question.

".....How many were there before me?"

"You were the third person~. Ta' other two were beaten by Ruka-chan into pulp without even talking....."

"C-Can't be helped ya' know. Ta' master is powerful you wouldn't hear any talking....."

Ruka giving her excuse to Mana while looking at her hands, both of her fists had an unbelievably hard callus. For sure, she was learning Karate with her flesh and blood since when she was young. Also, her duel avatar was still fairly pure «Bluish lineage»— furthermore, it's a hand-to-hand striking type which can be said as an almost «Perfect Match». Seeing a heavy blow that can oppose the sharp techniques for the first time, it would be difficult even if she was only mid-level.

".....Fumu. For now, I understand the situation..... The «Trouble» you are talking about is.....?"

Both of them strangely hesitated to answer Kuroyukihime's question. After a few seconds, Mana replied with a small voice.

“That is.....I mean, the plot is too complicated that we honestly don’t understand it either..... Master said «Majimun»..... saying that a monster came.....”

“In other words, the details should be heard from this master of yours.....or something like that.”

Murmuring and reflecting for three seconds, Kuroyukihime nodded.

“Fine then. I’ll go meet your master.”

Immediately, the two young girls’ face was shining again.

“Thank goodness! It’s really like what Mana said~!”

“L-Like she.....said?”

“Mana said it ya’ know, ta’ person will meet from now will help us!”

It was as if Ruka’s words were saying that this encounter was already foreseen, instinctively looking at Mana’s face, only her usual smile and laugh can be seen. Kuroyukihime wondering if it would be better if the power of Yuta was to be explained, the two girls suddenly stood up.

“Well then~, without delay to my house.....”

“Wa.....Wait, stop!”

Hurriedly pushing them with both of her hands, they sat once again.

“Though I said I will meet up, I have to restrain from doing so in reality. I came from Tokyo, with that said, I may have formerly encountered that person in Accel World.”

“Yah, that maybe~. Yup~, that surely may not be good..... It will be difficult if the master saw a churakaagii like Neenee ya’ know.”

Mana ‘Ahahaha’ laughed hearing what Ruka said while somewhat being anxious but for the mean time, this is closed for now. Without any more time left, they arranged to meet here once again at tomorrow afternoon— Kuroyukihime glancing at the lower right side of her vision, she saw the time display. It was three minutes before four o’clock, recognizing it, her head quickly got cold.

“Oh.....no.”

Suddenly blurting out, the blankly staring Ruka and Mana left the words ‘Well then, see ya’ tomorrow!’ and Kuroyukihime rushed out from «Sabani» cafe’s open terrace.

Going north from the shopping district, she continued to dash along the brick-paved sidewalk towards the resort hotel and by the time she arrived at the front entrance, the time had just been over two minutes thirty seconds at four in the afternoon.

At the quarried white-stone gatepost, she saw a leaning girl wearing a one-piece dress basking in the deep red setting sun, she slowed down her speed and walked forward.

Kuroyukihime saw Wakamiya Megumi’s smile as she raised her head when noticed the stepping sound of the mules. It was her always tenderly gentle smile— on the inside, there was something a bit different can be seen, Kuroyukihime had a small breath.

In Megumi’s left hand, there was a small violet paper bag that wasn’t brought out from the hotel. Kuroyukihime

stopping at that moment, she lowered her head one meter away right before her from where she stopped.

“.....I’m sorry I was late.”

“It’s fine Hime, It’s just two minutes.”

Megumi had her smile again after saying that, with her voice and facial expression, there was an unusual hue that spread. Perhaps, something like— loneliness. Unlike Megumi, Kuroyukihime’s hands held nothing, that’s the reason for sure.

“No.....once again, I must apologize. Forgive me, Megumi..... I wasn’t able to choose a present.”

That’s right. Kuroyukihime and Megumi both agreed to choose a souvenir before parting 30 minutes ago and meet up here. However Kuroyukihime had a different action, the duel followed by the discussion in reality occupied her attention, using up all of the time.

Kuroyukihime lowering her head, Megumi lightly tapped her right shoulder and with a cheerful voice said.

“It’s okay Hime, the trip isn’t over yet..... there’s still time to look for souvenirs from now.....but.....”

Her Shaking words was interrupted, Kuroyukihime was surprised as she raised her face.

Right before Megumi’s eyes, the setting sun shined on two drops of tears that almost fell at the same time. Shining like an orange jewel, it fell one after another on the brick below and disappeared.

“.....Megumi.”

Kuroyukihime calling her name with a hoarse voice, Megumi stepped away and rubbed the corner of her eye with her right hand.

“H-Huh, why is it..... I didn’t want this..... I’m sorry hime, I’m really..... It’s nothing, it’s just.....”

Megumi said it with her mouth about to open but, her tears doesn’t stop. Before long, with her back turned back like giving up, a trembling voice emerged.

“.....Sorry, I’ll go back to our room first.....Hime, slowly take your time until the assembly.....”

And then, Kuroyukihime was not able to do anything but watch her close friend’s back as she was about ran away. After standing stiff for nearly ten seconds, she leaned the side of her body on the gate post deeply sighed.

“I was.....stupid.”

Squeezing that voice out from her nearly empty lung, it was surprisingly thin.

“.....I have been busy with stuff in Accel World that I’ve neglected the real world, prioritizing on instructing Haruyuki-kun and Takumu-kun..... this is a mess.”

Closing both of her eyes, the red setting sun was screened by her eyelids and some faces surfaced.

A lingering long chestnut colored hair and graceful smile of Kurasaki Fuuko— «Sky Raker».

Below her clean-cut black bangs, a young and resolute smile from Shinomiya Utai— «Ardor Maiden».

Though she hasn’t met them in reality, an avatar with its body wrapped by transparent water «Aqua Current», and a silhouette glittering with graphite, «Graphite Edge», came after. Then, the following numerous duel avatars that appeared, vanished. They are everyone from the destroyed legion two and half year ago, members of the «Foremost Nega Nebulas». It was an afterimage of bonds that wouldn’t return again from Kuroyukihime’s mistake,

leading into tragedy with them falling apart.

“.....Am I.....qualified to seek someone’s connection, even the truth is.....”

Muttering, she saw a white right hand on her mind. The fingers were shaking then disappeared, the next to appear was a jet-black blade. Cutting everything apart, unable to reject the edge—.

And, at that time.

The sharp edge appearing deep within the darkness, a small hand reaching from the front gently grasped it.

Immediately, the sword returned to the original fingers. A face appeared while clinging to the hand as it was grasped, standing there was the one year younger, round faced young lad. Shyly encouraging with a smile, the young lad said with a clear voice.

I held out my hand for you, senpai.

“.....Ahh, that’s right, Haruyuki-kun.”

Answering, she opened her eyelids and strongly clasped her right hand. Kuroyukihime pressed that hand on her chest and started to eagerly run, chasing after Megumi who went back to the hotel.

Part 4

The green sea was shining gold.

Struck by a westerly wind, the lines of ripples were swayed but, it wasn’t water. It was tall soft grasses. Surveying the horizon of the sea of grass, this scale was something that doesn’t exist on the real world’s Japan/Okinawa main island.

No artificial buildings can be seen at all. On the contrary, you almost can’t find large trees and rocks. The thing that can be said different was a small stream flowing between the loose hills. What stands out on the scarce terrain’s extreme slopes was the abrupt movement of a hemisphere shape, sticking out from the sea of grass.

The soft ellipse drawn on the hemisphere’s major axis was more than four meters. On the top surface, there was a hexagonal panel— a «Deck», arranged without gaps. It was tinted with a greenish-gray metallic luster and seemed really hard.

There were six apertures at the bottom of the hemisphere, the stretching four of it were short, thick, sturdy supports/movement organs which is the «Foot». From the hole on the rear, there was a taper-pointed sharp «Tail». Stretching along the hole, it resembled the form of a dragon from somewhere, a «Head». Something cylindrical lined on it, a large pyroclastic cone tusk, the grass right before it was completely torn off and a crunching sound was raised as it chew.

In other words, this large creature, if looked at wholly, is a «Turtle»— and can be said from a land tortoise family. However, just like this grassland itself, a large tortoise like that wouldn’t exist in this modern Japan. No, for that matter, the largest tortoise, «Stupendemys Geographicus», became extinct on earth five million years ago with it’s large carapace length of 2/5 meters.

This grassland isn’t the real Japan/Okinawa main island, and so, this tortoise isn’t a real living creature either.

The game program of mystery, «Brain Burst 2039», creates another Japan. It is called «Accel World», the concealed superior layer of the VR world. «Unlimited Neutral Field», it was the name of this infinitely continuing sea of grass. Also, along the land tortoise with four meter length carapace, those living in this field are just moving objects. Its species name is «Armor Clad Tortoise», a wild class enemy—.

The indicated inhabitants of this world, including the large tortoise, are referred to as common enemy and have their opponents, the visitors of this world, «Burst Linker». However small, however harmless the individual maybe is, without exception, the Burst Linkers within aggro-range will be assaulted without any question. And it is strong. It is outrageously strong. The level 4 Linkers who have just got the right to dive in the unlimited field have a 99 percent of impossibility to defeat wild class enemies by themselves, let alone the lesser class. Much less those higher beast class and legend class, at the time their silhouettes are seen on the horizon, they must be avoided or else, disaster and the likes will happen.

Though there are frightening enemies, they can only live in a place where there are no Burst Linkerintruders present. In the real world's wildlife, it is the same—, no, it is much peaceful than reality in a sense. It's because the enemies do not compete with each other. Every enemy of the same class has their territory and nearly doesn't get close together. They roam this vast world with carefree, sleep and food to eat. Even the large tortoise, Armor Clad Tortoise, leisurely chews the grass.

—On the contrary.

In this peaceful grassland, a disturbed scent was carried by a blowing gust of wind. When the large tortoise raised its face, its long neck was stretched as it frequently glared southward.

Suddenly, there was a various hitting quick movement heading north, the earth grumbled as it stood up and started running. Even in the distant, the same type of tortoises and the elephant looking form of the large enemies started to move to the same direction simultaneously. It was as if they were trying to run away from something terrible.

After a few second, «It» showed up from the horizon in the south.

Its sleek silhouette had an overall length surpassing the large tortoise by more than five times. It has a certain kind of shell, with a blade-sharp body form, winded in a high-speed plunge like swimming in the sea of grass.

The large build spanning 20 meters swiftly galloping had four legs at the bottom of its body. Though it was small, its bulging swelling muscles can not be compared with the tortoise. As its thick, sharp claw firmly clutched on the ground kicks up, the large body looked like flying with the speed it gained. In its back, a long extending tail almost didn't leave the ground.

At the both sides of its spear like pointed snout, its lens like emotionless red eyes shines and its large mouth slowly open and closes below it. Every time its jaws move, dozens of white fangs with the size of a large sword appears.

Though its form is roughly close to a crocodile, the impression is obviously different. This one can also be called a «Dinosaur». Naturally, to the same enemy tortoise running away, this kind of large size presence is different. It surpassed the beast class and it can take the name of a legend class, it is Accel World's strongest tyrant no doubt.

The gapless large frame scale-armor shined bluish black as this dinosaur plunged at a terrible speed on the grassland. As it got close to the desperately running Armor Clad Tortoise, it made a big jump as it was almost right before the rear. In the air, ferocious fangs lined up on its jaw when it opened. Diving in a steep angle, a fierce impact sound roared as it landed. Dense dust fumes surged up and within it, a pointed snout appeared.

Inside its large mouth something was held, a pitiful land tortoise. Its carapace was tightly held and no matter how it flapped its limbs, it was unable to escape. The dinosaur's eyeball shined deep red and the surrounding muscles on its jaws swelled. The tortoise's metal luster carapace was pierced by its fang and orange sparks splashed like a waterfall.

Pishi There was a dry sharp sound. At the same time, the land tortoise stopped moving. On the thick shell, one, two tubes ran through the thin land tortoise. The tortoise's whole body was wrapped at once and a pale blue light leaked— on the next moment.

The wild class enemy, Armor Clad Tortoise, inside the jaws of its predator, changed into thousands of glass shards as it shatteringly disappeared.

The unclenched tip of the large dragon's mouth slightly strained, it started running on the grassland once again. The thirsty red eyes ascertained its next prey from the lower class enemy group running about on the sea of grass.

Gradually increasing its speed, a very high dorsal fin stood out on the large body's back, it looked like a sailing yacht. On the front of that dorsal fin, another small projection stood out.

It's not originally the dinosaur's organ. A foreign object— it was a different type of a moving object. Nevertheless, no enemy can be a parasite to another. With a length of one meter and a few ten centimeters, it was a silhouette standing with two legs and obviously, of a person— namely, a Duel Avatar. An enemy is by no means mutual to an opponent for it to stay on its head however, the dragon doesn't show any indication of shaking its head and continues to swim through the sea of grass.

The duel avatar's hands loosely hangs, holding onto a thin chain. The chains extending for a few meters to left and right, the chains are wind together in the dragon's head from its jaws. On the way it looks, it was as if a jockey manipulating its horse with the two long reigns. As the mysterious Burst Linker rides on the back, the large dinosaur sought slaughter furthermore, charging toward the horizon.

After several tens of seconds.

The stillness returned to the sea of grass and from the bottom of it, a silhouette slowly stood up. It was another duel avatar. It has a linear scheme and simple design but, the armor color was deep red. Even though it really stood out within the green grassland, the large dragon overlooked it for some reason.

The avatar often continued to concentrate a stern look on the direction where the dragon runs to. However, it soon lightly sighed and turned around. He, or maybe she, walked away on an opposite direction from the dragon and the world was filled with only a calm sound of breeze once again. For the one who broke it, no longer appears.

Part 5

Out of 120 third year students of Umesato Middle School, 61 people chose the Henoko/Yorontou plan and lodges on a large resort hotel with over 400 available guest rooms. The once called «Camp Schwab» was built facing the capes' beautiful and shallow beach, from the window to the north was the deep green Henoko peak and from the window to the south, there was the panoramic view of the grand Pacific Ocean.

However, for Kuroyukihime who just got out of the elevator, she jogged without even bothering to look at other windows as she advanced. Approaching their assigned room, No.728, the door lock operating window appeared on her virtual desktop. An icon on the right of the window was lit indicating that a same room occupant was inside.

Standing before the solid natural-wood door, she took a large breath and knocked twice.

“Megumi..... It's me. I'm coming in.”

Kuroyukihime whispered facing the automatically opened intercom window and without waiting for a reply, she released the lock and pushed the knob open.

The little extravagant room with an ocean view where the middle school students are staying on for the trip was dim. What lightened everything were the melting setting sun and the golden lace curtain of the ocean, diffidently illuminating from the window on the south.

In this north to south long room, two beds lined up on the west side wall with only blankets piled on it. A small violet paper bag was on the side cabinet.

Kuroyukihime stepped on the carpet barefoot crossing the room and gently sat on the rear bed.

Megumi rolled under the blanket like a kid but, she wasn't sleeping for her twitching body movement was passed on the mattress. From what it appears, she seems like a hurt infant and Kuroyukihime's chest had a sharp throb once more.

.....I really didn't even know anything about her, I didn't even tried to know.....

Reflecting along the recognized pain, Kuroyukihime opened her lips.

".....I'm sorry, Megumi. I was a fool."

Muttering those words, a fast reply unexpectedly came from below the cloth pile.

"That's not it. You didn't do anything wrong, Hime. I.....I just got ahead of myself. On this trip.....for seven days, I had Hime.....for myself....."

There was silence for a moment, Megumi pulled the hem of the blanket and curled her small body even more.

"A-Ahaha.....what the hell am I saying. I'm sorry Hime, I'm only saying weird things. Forget it.....forget everything. I'm fine, just a little bit more and I'll be back to myself from.....before....."

Opposite to what her words were, she violently faltered her wet words.

Kuroyukihime tightly biting her lips and without any intention of turning her body back, gently placed her right hand on Megumi's back above the sheet. She slowly caressed the quivering thin body and whispered across the blanket.

"Megumi. Listen to me."

Changing her tone, she told her intentions.

"—What you said on the beach earlier was true. I.....besides the real world, I have another world where time flows differently."

"....."

"The first time I went to that world seven years ago, I was eight years old. Since then, for half a day.....no, I have spent time more than anyone in this country. At that time, I would get confused on which was the true real world....."

She let out a small sigh without realizing. Unaware that Megumi's body stopped shaking, Kuroyukihime continued her monologue that wasn't revealed to anyone before.

"Particularly, when I left home and entered middle school.....whether where I belong, even the idea of my existence was vague. Megumi, you said before that I found my way again when I met the lad Arita fall last year.....that's half wrong and half right. It's because he is, **like me, a resident of that world.**"

For Megumi who was not a Burst Linker, this talk didn't matter. However, Kuroyukihime was hesitating. But if he was here in this place, he would definitely say that she should speak everything from the back of her mind sincerely.

Kuroyukihime took a deep breath once again and with more conviction, she continued talking.

"—Megumi. Immediately after Umesato's admission, you saved me from being indecisive and just loitering around. Right after the entrance ceremony, from the time I heard a voice saying let's eat lunch together, you and I didn't stop and continued from being firmly connected in the real world. Many bonds mediated by «that world» was lost and even now, it's restored little by little.....the only bond I have connected to in «this world» was to my only friend, no other than you, Megumi."

Her words were forged with all of her feelings, Megumi, who knew no details of Accel World's location, went along unknowingly.

It has meaning on its own way, though the words were too favorable for her condition. What said was similar to that Kuroyukihime was known to exist on two worlds and the bond with her friend Megumi was only connected with half of her.

However, she didn't want to lie to her close friend. Within Kuroyukihime, the once lost bonds in Accel World— she wants to meet Kurasaki Fuuko, Shinomiya Uta and a lot more other comrades once again and the wiped off feeling of fighting together will exist again. Yet those feelings aren't the same deep feelings she holds for Wakamiya Megumi. Kuroyukihime doesn't want Megumi to know her as Accel World's traitor, the Black King Black Lotus, but as a plain female middle school student—.

Kuroyukihime conveyed all of her feelings with her right palm to her skin through the blanket— if you put it in Accel World, it would be called «Shin'i».

Eventually, Megumi's body restlessly moved changing its direction and from her white cover, her fluffy short hair was exposed. Megumi, who wrapped the blanket to her body like a cloak, only had her face out and slowly raised her upper body, facing Kuroyukihime. Noticing her wet pupils and red swelling corner of her eyes, Kuroyukihime bit her lips— but, faster than that.

Megumi put her head on Kuroyukihime's right shoulder. At the same time, there was a nearly no sound whispering voice.

“.....Thank you, Hime. What you said just now, made me really happy. But....., but.....I'm sorry.....”

A voice with a hint of tears mixed, Kuroyukihime asked a question as she turned the slender body in her arms.

“Why are you apologizing? There's nothing that you need to apologize for. I'm the one who forgot our promise.....”

“That's not it.”

Megumi, above Kuroyukihime's shoulder, slowly shook her head.

“It's not about the souvenir. I.....the truth is, I should have apologized to Hime much more long ago.....”

From below the blanket two hands were extended and gently wrapped Kuroyukihime's arms. Her face away from the shoulder, large teardrops amassed on her eyes and she strongly blinked once it was near the limit. Drops fell down and made grey spots on the sheet.

“.....The truth is, I.....that time.....”

However, before those words could be finished, a mechanical alarm sound filled both of their hearing. At the same time, a school trip executive committee assembly window hid both of their faces. Before dinner, there will be an adviser involved regular meeting after five minutes. There were names of two student council officers and executive committee members lined up.

Megumi, firmly grasping Kuroyukihime's arms once again, soon loosen her grip and moved away her body. She took a tissue from the sideboard, wiped her eyes and said.

“.....As expected, I can't skip this one, Hime. Wait a little bit, I'll prepare immediately.”

Her tone returned from being the normal student council secretary. Megumi went out of the bed faster than Kuroyukihime's call to stop her and she vanished into the washroom.

“.....Megumi.....”

Swirling her sight as she faced the sheet, the spot where the tears fell just several moments ago had already completely vanished.

The reserved hour for the buffet dinner in the hotel's restaurant begun, Megumi was in her usual rhythm, grilling to take care of Kuroyukihime.

Normally, the independently living Kuroyukihime's diet was somewhat unbalanced due to her staple food of frozen meals from a suitable restaurant. Apart from it, though it doesn't mean that the specified raw materials are hated, there are just «things that somehow can't be understood» which she's not good at but, the too many unidentifiable objects of Okinawan cuisine should not be carelessly handled.

However, Megumi rapidly served food on Kuroyukihime's plate on her own, explaining stuff like 'This is stir-fried wheat bran with eggFuuchanpuru' and 'This is sponge gourdNaaberaa soup', making words of gratitude to only come out of her mouth. Timidly putting out the delicious looking food on her hand, she firmly realized it once she has eaten them.

The bathing period followed an almost identical development, she poured shampoo on Kuroyukihime's back like a kid, on top of that, she didn't stop until Kuroyukihime went to the dryer making her feel somewhat dizzy once she got back to their room. Sitting down on her own bed sighing momentarily, a mineral water bottle was held out right in front of her.

"Here you go, Hime."

"T-Thanks."

Saying her gratitude as she accepted it, Kuroyukihime sipped the cold water three times and having to bear with it, she gave out a short laugh.

"F-Fufufu.....Somehow, I feel like that I went back on being a child that can't do anything."

"Ara, isn't it fine once in awhile? There are always enormous vice-president related works at school, it's good to relax as much during the school trip."

"Even if you say that Megumi, there are also enormous secretary related work."

Looking at each other's face, they both laughed together this time.

Umesato Middle School's Student Council yearly re-election was held at October, Kuroyukihime and Megumi have been participating on this routine task as executives since their first year second semester. Kuroyukihime appeared going out with Megumi but, her true motive was still hidden till now that she cannot help but be ashamed of her innermost thoughts.

Kuroyukihime, apart from what she thought of trying to serve the whole student body as a student council officer, she merely wanted a higher level of access authority within the school's local network. On Umesato, getting a hold of the school system to build a fortress to defend her from the six kings' assassins was an indispensable necessity—and that kind of reasoning. Of course, she can't neglect her officer duties however, there were no noble ideals.

*I must apologize to Megumi about it.....*as soon as she thought of that, the associated words some few hours ago returned to her mind.

When the first tear seen on Megumi started to flow, she spoke. There was something I should have apologized for long ago.

There were no such occasions coming to her mind. Worrying for their situation thinking if she would ask her right

here and right now, she changed her facial expression and about to open her mouth— however. As if guessing a hint, Megumi moved straight to her own bed, turned her face and said.

“Well then, we have a lot scheduled for tomorrow, let’s retire for the day.”

“.....A-Ahh..... that’s right.”

Kuroyukihime nodded, Megumi run her finger through her virtual desktop and pressed the lighting.

From the window on the south with an open curtain, a moonlight far brighter than on Tokyo shining through it dyed the room pale blue. Moonlight of southern countries had a sort of sorcerous wavelength soaked on it, suddenly making her eyelids feel heavy.

She brought down her body lying in the bed and she felt like her thoughts were suddenly absorbed right below it. Closing her eyes, a blanket was gently covered on her body and a voice echoed on her ears.

“Good night, Hime.”

Part 6

April 17th, a sunny morning of the following day.

The vacation season just started on the early days of this month in Henoko Beach, with the humid temperature passing over 30 times for this noon, the great majority of Umesato students are on the sea. Drifting aboard the float moving along the water, they were having fun on their own way however, if one is to say, Kuroyukihime laid her body languished below the same beach parasol she was on yesterday.

“Fu~~.....”

Letting out a deep sigh, she lifted and took a sip from the glass of coconut juice from the nearby table. She lightly returned and extended her legs from her black swimsuit and pushed up her slipping sunglass.

“.....Most of the students can’t be seen anymore right, Hime.”

Megumi spoke like she was amazed on the nearby deck chair, Kuroyukihime was broadly grinning while playing with the large glass using her fingers.

“If this was a real piña colada then it would be perfect. It seems like this place is out of the social camera’s sight, shall we try if we can order?”

“In that case, I would ask for one frozen margarita then.”

“.....No, I’ll stop. Margarita is still way too early for us.”

Ahem, she cleared her throat and looked at the lower right side of her virtual desktop, the time was around 12:30 in the afternoon.

The very interesting and tightly scheduled trip on Okinawan colleges as well as trekking on Henoko dam organized for this morning almost emptied her health gauge. It is not just the body feeling heavy. Almost at the same time when she woke up at six o’clock in the early morning, she received a dive call from the lad Arita Haruyuki who was in Tokyo.

In the virtual space Kuroyukihime loaded, he apologized for the sudden call first and explained with the reason of ‘it’s painful that senpai was far away’. With those words, Kuroyukihime felt pain shooting out from inside of her chest, having an intuition that it wasn’t just that. For sure, something is happening right now on the six hundred thousand kilometer far away Umesato Middle school. The lad Arita is being tormented and driven in a corner— perhaps, it

was something brought from Accel World.

However, Kuroyukihime didn't ask him about it. The question 'What happened?' almost went out of her mouth but she desperately refrained from it. He doesn't want to say it himself, the lad Arita was working hard to deal with the trouble he was in with his own strength. If somehow he wished for support, she would immediately make up excuses so that she can fly home from Okinawa but, for him now.....she believes at her only «Child», leaving it to him this time.

And although that decision was in her mind, the anxiety still wouldn't go away. Kuroyukihime sigh her fear away, hanging both of her shoulders heavily, she then murmured on her mind.

—Do your best, Haruyuki-kun. I also have things to do as a Burst Linker in this place. «Things to do» for the mean time is the mission request of the Okinawan girl Linkers contacted yesterday but, I still don't know the exact details at present. Some kind of trouble occurred on this land's Accel World, in relation with that, Kuroyukihime came up with an agreement with those girls to meet their «Master» and speaking of it, they'll move from Henoko to the far north Yoritou tomorrow morning. It would be better if the problem is resolved before that— Anyway, I'll hear all of the details from their master.

Kuroyukihime raised her upper body and removed her sunglass and raised her voice to her close friend, whose eyes were closed, on the nearby deck chair.

"Megumi....."

Megumi, lifting up her eyelids, lightly leaned her head and facing her, she lowered her head once and said.

"I'm really sorry about yesterday. Today, I'll surely buy a souvenir. I'll search the whole shopping district from end to end until I find the perfect gift for Megumi."

Megumi tried to open her lips a couple of times. However, she closed her lips at once and took a deep breath, and then she cheerfully smiled and muttered.

"Yup..... I'll be expecting that, Hime."

After relaxing in carefree at the beach until two o'clock, Kuroyukihime left Megumi and went back to the hotel ahead of her.

She will be meeting up with those two, Ruka and Mana, on the same cafe as yesterday at three o'clock on the afternoon. To have Megumi act differently, she used the reason of buying a surprise present at a heartbeat however, it doesn't mean that she's not going to do so. «Increasing the kept secrets from her close friend in the real world» like this is one of the many curse given to a Burst Linker. Power and acceleration as its price. BB program will only give the same dispossession— just like how veteran linkers such as Kuroyukihime say it, it will just be a negative gain in the end if you think about it.

It's because when all points are used up forcing Brain Burst to uninstall, the only thing left is a great sense of loss and an empty reality. There was a terrible rumor that Burst Linkers leaving Accel World will have all of their memories related to Brain Burst wiped out, if that's the truth, then it's not just a relief but also a punishment at the same time, it's not that unthinkable.

While pondering with her thoughts, Kuroyukihime changed from her swim suit to plain clothes, as she was about to leave the hotel once again, she stopped and her chest was bathed with the unlikely bright sunlight of April.

".....Alright!"

She changed her mood with a short yell and marched quickly toward the main entrance. The time was still 2:10,

there was still enough time to keep her promise to Megumi. Do not neglect the real world and be too concentrated in Accel World—. That's the first law of legion «Nega Nebulas».

Kuroyukihime firmly stepped her flat mules at the brick pavement and rushed to the shopping district adjacent to the resort.

The cherished souvenir chosen for over 40 minutes was placed in a tote bag, as Kuroyukihime approached the «Sabani» cafe, a voice in a large volume came from the terrace making her shrink her neck.

“Oi~ Neene~ We're here~!”

If you look at it, there was Lagoon Dolphin, Asato Ruka, who she fought yesterday and her «Child» Corral Merrow, Itosu Mana, buzzingly waving their hands at the table. *They were both wearing their middle school sailor uniform today. If you think about it, it is a weekday afternoon, to meet 30 minutes earlier than yesterday's rendezvous, they might have come directly from school.*

Though there were no problems about it, pure white sailor uniforms are too noticeable in this shopping district with merely few tourist and foreigners. As a burst linker in hiding, she jogged towards the open terrace in a low posture and took a breath as she sat down at the table. Kuroyukihime ordered a guava juice for today and took a sip from it as it quickly arrived, she looked at the two girls before her once again.

If I remember correctly, Ruka is a second year while Mana is a first year, furthermore, they said that their age difference was three months which means Ruka was born before April while Mana was born after. A normal Burst Linker is usually older than their actual age, high leveled players have a strong tendency to be one but, there must be a reason for this level 4 and 5 prominent veteran girls to not have a sign of that.....

And so as Kuroyukihime thought of those, Ruka and Mana took out their Neuro Linkers from their own accustomed school bags and installed it in their well tanned necks, looking faintly attached. Their necks have unexpected «Linker Burn» mark, it could be said that the students from Okinawan colleges from the trip this morning introduced VR classes only to a small part of Okinawan public schools in Naha. In other words, the girls used Neuro Linker for education and other reason since they are young.....

“Well then onee-sama, we are going «up» for today.”

Mana suddenly said that as she raised her face, ‘n?’ Kuroyukihime knitted her eyebrows. Those two, without minding the situation, took a deep breath and,

“Ready~, three, two, one, Unlimited Bu-.....”

Buu Kuroyukihime spewed the small amount of guava juice on her mouth and hurriedly reached, closing both of their mouth.

“Wa.....Wait, stopstopstop!!”

“Mmga mmgaa!?”

“You guys, don't tell me that you're going to dive into the unlimited field here!!”

“Mgo mgo!!”

“Y-You can't, this is not good just as I thought!! Without any disconnection safety how could you behave like that, what would you do if you can no longer reach the portal!?”

“Mmgo.....mgomgo.....”

Then, both of their face turned pale and she soon let go of them. *Buha* Ruka and Mana with a breath, affirming that they won't recite the command once again and she stood up.

Getting behind those two, Kuroyukihime strongly gripped the collar of their sailor uniform and spoke with her most scary voice.

"I'll be the one to choose the dive location. There will be no complaints."

The two hanging like a cat, buzzingly nodded their head.

Kuroyukihime took them away and guided them to the full dive space provided in the resort hotel she was staying in. It is most safe to use the room on the seventh floor but, if she was found out taking in visitors, the school staff and the hotel staff would probably be angry.

It seems that those two, even if they habitually look at the hotel from the outside, they haven't been inside of it and below the chandeliers on the high ceiling, they randomly says 'Hoo' as they look around the cafeteria on the first floor. Ruka pushed Mana's back leading her to go up the staircase to the second floor for them to see more, an additional fee for two people was paid on the reception desk of the full dive space in the high class looking cafe. Kuroyukihime was free to use it since she was a guest.

The middle school students crammed in a four person booth, though it was late, they still said 'It's appropriately cool' and 'Don't worry, there was a time when shoppers ended up unplugging our Neuro Linkers', Kuroyukihime poured silent smiles which the lad Arita secretly(Kuroyukihime knows of it of course) named it as the «very cold Kuroyukihime smile».

Kuroyukihime took out three XSB cables from the equipment rack, *KachiKachiKachi* she inserted them at the wired connection router installed at the long table in front of the sofa. When the two turned their Neuro Linker wireless global connection to OFF, she inserted the plug on the other side of the connector without any questions.

Ruka and Mana blushing and blurting out stuff like 'Ah~' and 'Iyan~' when they were connected, she ignored their reactions for the time was too precious and set the router's automatic disconnection after five minutes. Even though if it is a safety measure, it's still 5000 minutes inside— the calculated remaining time is 83 hours. If it is with that much they haven't settled the trouble yet, then Kuroyukihime's assistance wasn't enough in the first place.

Finally, Kuroyukihime connected the third XSB cable into her own Neuro Linker, faced the two people seated at the opposite side and said.

"Listen, I'll meet your master as promised, but I can't guarantee on what will happen afterward. At the worst possible case, there could be a battle. You should be prepared."

"Okay~!!"

The two cheerfully raised their hands in unison, becoming worried if they really understood, Kuroyukihime opened her mouth to start the countdown.

"Well then, we'll dive on the count of five. Five, four, three....."

"Oh, Neeneee wait!"

A voice was suddenly raised from Ruka like she was surprised and this time, she blocked Kuroyukihime's mouth.

"W-What?"

Turning her face to Ruka, she had her index finger on her lips and pointing out her gaze towards Mana who was sitting at the left side.

A few seconds ago, the girl who was supposed to be cheerfully waiting for the dive timing— drastically changed.

Her ponytail tied hair was swaying and her upper body was slowly moving back and forth. Her pupils became faint, indiscernible on where it looks at, a very faint voice seems to leak out but its content was inaudible.

“W-What’s wrong?.....”

As Kuroyukihime was about to her body lean forward, Ruka stopped her once again and whispered near her face.

“Kandaari.....the blood of Yuta is out.”

“.....”

Dubiously stunned as she watched, Mana’s episode suddenly stopped just like at the time when it started. After blinking for a few times, she turned her face to the right and at that time, her usual expression completely returned. The girl, looking at Kuroyukihime with her deep sea color reminiscent pupils, spoke with an innocent voice.

“Onee-sama, one more please.”

“.....What?”

“This. A string.”

Pinching it as she spoke, it was the XSB cable connecting her Neuro Linker from the router. Kuroyukihime looked around inside the narrow booth, there were only three people and no one else naturally. The door was locked by Kuroyukihime’s electronic key, there will be no one else that can enter.

However, there was forcing color of confidence in Mana’s pupils. Kuroyukihime extended her hand as if it was guided, she took out the fourth XSB cable from the rack on the sofa and connected the one end at the router. All of the connectors or cables are now used up.

“.....So, where do I insert this plug?”

Mana smiled and replied to her question.

“Just leave it there please.”

“.....”

That something was for some reason but, problems in reality are of exception. Kuroyukihime laid the plug on the table then twist her neck for the last time and opened her mouth once again.

“Well then..... this time, will go in five counts. ”

Ruka and Mana nodded waiting for it, the countdown then started.

“Five, four, three, two, one, Unlimited Burst!”

The spell to open the gates of the real Accel World, «Unlimited Neutral Field», was released by the three’s lips. While their thoughts were severed and wrapped with a rainbow color as it was carried away from reality, Kuroyukihime murmured ‘Yare yare’ in silence.

The destroyer of order in Tokyo’s 23 wards and traitor to the six kings, the famous Black King Black Lotus has been swayed by the girls since yesterday. However, it also felt fresh and nostalgic at the same time. Just like very long ago, the time when the Burst Linkers dragged around the so called leader.

Kuroyukihime, captured in her deep emotions, was engrossed with the girls' requests and her usual tight precaution loosens without her realizing it.

Specifically, going to the dive space with those two, someone was staring at their backs from the farthest pillar though she did notice that single glance.

The one who was gazing, came out of hiding after the three of them went into the booth and hurriedly start to go toward the dive space.

Part 7

Kuroyukihime, coming out of the hotel in a hovering motion, turned her duel avatar's goggles looking up at the half-crumbled building.

With the bare steel frame's deep red rust and the flaking concrete cracks, the entire structure and terrain almost completely followed the original hotel. Henoko is not that large of a town in Okinawa and the social camera net also seems to have firmly run throughout this land. That means that the Unlimited Neutral Field has consecutively existed even in this place that is 600,000 kilometers away from Tokyo.

Feeling the extent of Accel World till now, Kuroyukihime once again looked at the surrounding desolate scene and murmured.

"This is..... the «Weathered» stage."

This time, she wasn't corrected by Lagoon Dolphin and Coral Merrow who was standing behind.

Originally, the duel field's various attributes are given their titles— such as «End of the Century», «Demonic City» and «Purgatory», those are not set by the BB system. The prime Burst linkers thinks of an appropriate name from the field's outward appearance and name it. Even the «Old Castle» stage from yesterday was given by those two's master, but for it to sound familiar to the Okinawan locals Ruka and Mana, it was replaced with the word «Gusuku».

If that's how it is, I wonder if the «Sacred Grounds» would be «Land of the GodsNiraikanai»..... Imagining that, Kuroyukihime confirmed that it would likely be far so she once again turned and spoke.

"So, where is your master?"

"This way~!"

Shouting cheerfully as usual, Dolphin turned around. Short fin-like projections protrude from various places in the streamlined armor of the blue avatar that was running off, 'Wait for me!', and the coral colored avatar with resembling design but longer delicate fins went chasing.

The deep red cockspur coral flowers blooms on the hotel's front yard in the real world but now, only a dreary scene in dilemma of rotting concrete flakes and rusted steel frames on the building stands out. The ground, also covered with red-tea colored dust, fluttering dusty wind rose at times when it blows but the two girls, cheerfully dashed over without care. Kuroyukihime, partially leaning over her body, also accelerated her hovering movement.

The slightly cracked road was reached a few minutes later and small aggregated buildings were seen on the way. In the real world, this would be the shopping district that Kuroyukihime and Megumi went to shop. However, there were no clerks attracting tourists naturally. There was only dry wind blowing through between the building's bare red-rusted steel frame——

Or not.

In the heart of the shopping district— possibly at the same coordinates where «Sabani» cafe is present, there is the

one and only building with thin flashing neon pipes, a store. The characters on the irregularly on-off lighting were written on a strange font but, the word **[BAR]** was not unreadable.

“Heh....., a «Shop» in a place like this huh.....”

Kuroyukihime suddenly muttered to herself.

A so called «Shop», scattered throughout the whole Unlimited Neutral Field, is a «NPC Store». There are various types, from special effect card items to armor reinforcements, clothes and foods/drinks, and on top of that, even a «Home» where buy and sell is possible.

In Tokyo, they exists mainly in Ikebukuro and Shinjuku gathered in downtown Akihabara, it's rare for them to do business on a remote area with nothing surrounding it. Such «Hidden Shops» found are specialties, it can even be a group of hobby rather, they certainly stretched their leg out even on the far way Henoko in Okinawa.

On the way approaching the store, it seems that the BAR signboard raised was from above a tavern. In the real world, middle school students cannot order let alone enter such places but, both Dolphin and Merrow rushed into the store without any hesitation at all, shouting in a loud voice.

“Master, haidaigood afternoon!!”

After a several few seconds, a little lifeless male voice responded from inside the store.

“Yea.....afternoon.....”

“Tsk, that's wrong! A ikigaman's greeting should be GOOD AFTERNOON!”

In Ruka's retort,

“Y-Yea.....afternoon.....”

Listening to his restating voice, Kuroyukihime suspected and leaned her head. Stopping her feet in front of the store, she peeked on the situation inside from the crumbling exterior wall.

“Ha~, it's broad daylight yet your drinking..... Even in a place like this, master is really an Okinawan geezer~.”

Mana speaking like she was disappointed, ‘I'm not a geezer.....I'm still in first year high.....’ he grumbled and continued with a voice, ‘Bar-Master, a three hundred year old sake on the rocks!’.

“□*△÷○”

An unidentifiable electronic sound responded and a full-metal robot robotically walked from inside the counter. Its design was fairly similar of a Duel Avatar, a NPC working as a shop clerk popularly known as «Drone». Operated by the BB system in the same way as of an enemy, an inhabitant of this world.

Like transferring an adequate amount from an iron pipe, the drone placed a rustic tin plate cup on the table leaving the words ‘\$x&+\' and left. The cup was gripped by a hand coming from the other side of the table and a guzzling sound echoed.

“Come on, today is not ta' time for drinking! Master, we've brought someone, someone who can help us!!”

Dolphin shouted with both of her hands on her hips and after some silence, an uncaring voice was heard as expected.

“Hwat~, ya' really looked for duel in ta streets? Didn't I tell ya' it's pointless?.”

At that point, Kuroyukihime arrived at a conviction and entered the store without making a sound. Coming in

between the lined up, rusted iron-plated tables, she proceeded inside.

The two's master seemed to sprawl on a secluded ottoman at the end of the table. The figure is still cannot be seen from an angle on the other side. Not noticing the approaching Kuroyukihime, the virtual alcohol drink was once again gulped and shouted.

"Pointless, pointless, it's pointlessnesssss. Bringing along one or two helpers wouldn't be much for that monster!"

".....Oi, you there."

"Ta' level 7 meOre-sama-chan, ta' once called «Strongest in History» in Tokyo, even my hand and feet wasn't enough. Cleaning up that guy, even a level 8 is insufficient, insufficient! There should be at least a level 9 «King»!"

"Oi you, show a little face."

"No, no, even with a king it's dangeroussss! Someone specialized in physical attack like «Sword SaintVanquish», or better yet «Absolute CutterWorld End»....."

"I said oi."

"Hwat ta' hell is with you and your racket!? I'm telling you, Unless you bring the Black King here on this store, I wouldn't.....even.....move....."

With courageous caustic words, the «Master», finally raising his upper body from the ottoman, gradually slowed down his words as he saw Kuroyukihime with his drunken eyes and eventually, he completely sunk into silence.

On the other hand on Kuroyukihime's direction, both of her arm blades raised a high sound as it were knocked together and she lively shouted.

"It really is you! How nostalgic, it's been many years, «Crikin»!"

".....eh.....lies.....no.....time out....."

The dumbfounded burst linker, with his body wrapped in a deep red armor, raised and lowered his yellow eye lens many times as he muttered.

"T-That form.....that leg.....and calling Ore-sama-chan.....Crikin, do-do-don't tell me, you're real? Ta' monster Black King? Bla-.....? -ck Lo-.....? -tus.....?"^[1]

Cutting Kuroyukihime's name in a strange way as it came out of his mouth, the tin cup rolled down from the avatar's right hand to the table, giving off a miserable metallic sound.

The «Master» sat back sandwiched between Ruka and Mana from both sides, Kuroyukihime also sat down on the opposite ottoman for the time being. Here in Accel World, even if you don't order for a drink in the bar, the store clerk wouldn't be angry.

"At any rate.....don't go telling me that you moved in Okinawa."

As she muttered, she looked at «Crikin»'s upper body again.

It was quite a distinct Duel Avatar form. A flat hexagonal part was placed at his head like a cap and a cylinder at his face below as a piston. The thickness of his body was almost the same as his head and his arms were semi-circularly flat. The most eye-catching was the fine carvings at the body's armor surface looking like a jagged mold.

As his elliptic eye-lens blinked bit-by-bit, Crikin nodded once and answered.

“It has been a little three years already ya’ know. Well, my old man and my mother suddenly divorced. I was asked whom should I go with and ended up with my old man, but I didn’t think that he would suddenly go to Okinawa without tellinggg! When I came to, it was too late to say that ‘I should have gone with my mother’ and so, I was forcibly dragged to Henoko, now I’m here.....and that’s how it is. ”

“I see..... I’ve thought that you were PK reality-attacked and went into a total loss.”

“Well, I’m in a tough spot somewhat similar to that extent. I was expecting that of course in Henoko, but when I went on Naha and Nago, there weren’t any Burst Linkers in town eitherrr!”

His crimson body shook as he hysterically laughed.

He, in the olden days around three years ago— that means at the time when the «foremost Nega Nebulas» was still in good condition, he was a member of a rival legion «Aurora Oval». He is considerably a veteran, they fought in duels and territory fights many times from when Kuroyukihime was still low leveled and repeatedly hunted a common enemy as if they were comrades.

He reached level 7 at that time three years ago, if such a high-rank figure disappeared, it would be a «Physical AttackPK» in the real world or possibly, an unimaginable «Infinite Enemy KillEK» in the Unlimited Neutral Field or so — and things like that at those days are sorrowful memories but, the said person can be certainly said to be on quite an adversity of «Forced Change address to Okinawa».

“It’s nice..... that till now, you’re still a Burst Linker.”

Words suddenly came out of Kuroyukihime’s mouth and Crikin turned his head’s hexagonal-prism like being embarrassed.

“Hehe, well, half of it was leaving it on its own. She.....”

Then, he pointed his thumb on Lagoon Dolphin who was sitting at his right side,

“.....is my distant relative from my old man’s side. I stayed on her place and then decided to gamble. Install Brain Burst on her and if it’s a success, I’ll invest almost all ta’ Burst Point I have at that time to raise her to level 4. Then hunt on lesser enemies but, it wasn’t that stable with a tag.”

“I see..... It seems like you won your gamble.”

“Pretty much. She’s been studying Karate since she was child from her grandfather. Then she turned out perfectly relative to blue lineage and really powerful.”

The quietly listening to those two’s talk face till now of Lagoon Dolphin— Ruka, began to happily laugh ‘Nihehe’. But her behavior soon changed and tremblingly shook it off.

“No~, I’m still training ya’ know. I wasn’t even match to Neenee’s legs or arms.....”

“Of course ya’ wont Ru-bou! This person ya’ know, is one of the «Seven Kings of Pure Color» that silence crying kids.....”

As Crikin said that, Kuroyukihime was smiling and interrupted with a clear voice.

“No, everything was a story in the past. More than that, I want to hear more of your story. After successfully making Dolphin your «Child», she reached level 4 and the two of you kept on hunting enemies.....?”

“A-Ah.....but, just hunting on basic lesser class and occasionally aim at wild class when ta’ terms are good at a certain degree. Ta’ two of us steadily saved points and then went next on another gamble. Ru-bou’s friend studying Karate with her, Ma-bou, Ru-bou attempted to do a copy install on her.....well, I thought it was 80 percent likely to

fail.”

“Wait~, what do ya’ mean about that master~?”

Ma-bou, Mana, Coral Merrow, protested sullenly and Crikin, hysterically laughed again on his ironic remark and continued his explanation.

“Anyway, it miraculously succeeded with her and we raised Ma-bou to level 4 with ta’ earned points from hunting.....and so on, well that’s how it is.”

“I see..... —You’ve done well holding out here on Okinawa, Crikin.....”

Kuroyukihime calmly murmured and Crikin held out his chest out high saying ‘It’s nothing’, Merrow suddenly raised her right hand.

“Uhm, Onee-sama—. There’s something I’m curious about.”

“Nn, what is it?”

“Well, master always tell us 『I am called the «Strongest in History» in Tokyo』 and boast around~, is that really true?”

“Ah, I also want to know that!”

Dolphin hanged over and in contrast, Crikin gave out a voice as he dragged his body up.

“N-N-No, you know, that, I just exaggerated it a bit, or rather an arbitrary interpretation of reality.....”

“Ahh, that’s true.”

Kuroyukihime calmly nodded, the three suddenly stopped their movements. As Crikin continued to be frozen, Dolphin and Merrow shouted ‘Eeh——!’ in chorus.

Kuroyukihime was positive, Crikin's alias «Strongest in History» has it’s other half omitted.

His formal avatar name is, «Crimson Kingbolt».

He is strong. He is absolutely strong. The time when he appeared on the duel scene, his form, abilities and even just his name was the leading thing running about in Accel World, Burst Linkers in the neighboring areas tremble in fear on the thought of such a veteran coming at their headquarters.

However, that was only till everyone knew of his real condition. Crikin’s true nature is «Crimson» but not «King», yet a «Bolt»— in other words, he is just a «Screw» in one word. Even Kuroyukihime was just convinced later on by looking at a dictionary app. Kingbolt is even one word in English, a word pointing out a specific-use screw in architecture and engineering field.

When that truth was widely known, the Burst Linkers presented an alias for him. «The Man with a Name that is Strongest in HistoryStrongest Name»— he only told his pupils a half portion, I wonder who on earth is responsible for that.

Apart from that, Crikin joined the purple legion «Aurora Oval», the purple king «Purple Sheen», with an alias of «After Shock EmpressEmpress Voltage», jumped to conclusion with Kingbolt’s name that he uses a very-powerful lightning attack recruiting him right away and the story was handed down as if it was a true legend.

Containing some information on her chest, Kuroyukihime solemnly spoke to Ruka and Mana.

“Your master, when Burst Linkers hear the name «Crimson Kingbolt» in Tokyo, everyone gets frightened like a rabbit. After all, he is the «Strongest in History».”

“C-Cooooo! Master isn’t just a drunkard!”

“W-What a surprise! For me, I’ve thought he’s just a glutton!”

The expression of the two’s words were a little sensitive to the teacher’s honor, Crikin intensely taken aback, gave out an unnatural laugh.

“Na, nahaha, NAHAHA! Tha-t’s right young’uns, you should respect me more from now on, I’m like ta’ appetizer to your main dish! Ah-, excluding Naabera! Also for me, the leek on this island is not very.....”

Those words did not continue till the end.

Suddenly, a tremendous tremor pushed up the whole bar and it violently shook. Crikin, with his chest held up high, helplessly tumbled down on the floor, Kuroyukihime, Ruka and Mana stood up right away.

After a second, the next shock hit. Kuroyukihime immediately changed her thoughts, sharpened her senses and sensed where the tremor is coming from. The field itself is not shaking. Something, a huge destructive phenomenon is occurring very near.

“Outside!”

With a sharp shouting voice, she dashed from the bar to the main street. Her left-leg blade tip carved a deep arc on the ground as she turned west and then, «it» came to her view.

At the end of the long and narrow shopping district, two uprooted big buildings soared as it collapses. However low the terrain object endurance can be said in this «Weathered» stage, nothing can completely demolish buildings in just a short period of time. Holding her breath, she strained her sight below the glassy goggles.

Beyond the swirling dense red cloud dust— some kind of silhouette was moving slowly. It is big. It was impossible to be the size of a Burst Linker.

“That is.....”

Kuroyukihime leaked out a voice and Rune, who ran off to her side, responded.

“T-That’s it Neenee. The big monster.....that guy ate everyone.....”

“T-That.....ate.....?”

“The other enemies, ya’ know. But, it didn’t appear on the far hunting grounds till now.....”

Behind Ruka, Mana let out a trembling voice. There is no reason not to be frightened. The squirming shadow beyond had its head over 5 meters high already and I can’t have any clues of the whole span of it from here. If this was a beast tclass enemy.....no, it should be the worst-case scenario—

“D-Damn.....! Why even this town.....no, t’is not the time to be saying that. I beg you Lotus, hurry up and take Ru-bou and Ma-bou and to escape on the hotel’s «Leave point»!”

Crikin, who was the last one to run out, shouted as Kuroyukihime glimpsed at the small build avatar.

“—Immediate withdrawal? Do we really need to go that far?”

“Yah! If that guy captured us here, we, specially Ru-bou and Ma-bou, will be in danger of infinite EK!”

“But.....this is a town, it’s impossible for enemies to go over territories! Also, it’s impossible to be infinitely EKed in a territory.....”

“That’s not it, Lotus. It’s not just a mere enemy.....”

He cut off his words there for a moment, Crimson Kingbolt, squeezing out a low hoarse voice, spoke like he cannot admit it himself.

“That.....**That legend class enemy has been tamed.**”

Part 8

Enemy taming.

Kuroyukihime has heard information on existing ways to do so. There are two ways. A Burst Linker can use a taming specific exclusive ability— I have never met a person holding such rare ability even once—, or use an exclusive enhanced armament item. For the latter way, I have seen something like that once long time ago but, it only came from a treasure chest and it was taken by a party member after the owner lost on a dice game dice roll at that time, I don’t know whether it has been used after that.

On such very vague information, there’s still one thing that can be said certain.

Taming a Legend class enemy is impossible. It’s because they are Accel World’s rulers and can be even said as absolute warriors. Common attack techniques can kill if it’s a middle level Duel Avatar and if it’s a high rank group, they’ll be easily kicked off with a special attack.

In addition, in order to use a tool, it is necessary for the enemy’s health gauge to be shaved till it is nearly extinguished in order for the tame to be successful, in other words, you shouldn’t try and break a legend class opponent to a near-death rage.

The mere thought is enough to send shivers down the spine, it was nothing but a suicidal act.

Enclosed with more thoughts at that instant, Kuroyukihime turned to Crikin who was standing beside her and raised her unconscious question.

“.....Who is it? The guy who perpetrates such acts, his name is.....?”

However, the answer was still something surprising.

“Never had ta’ idea.”

“What!? If you look at the matching list one time.....”

“That’s.....no matter how many times I look at ta’ list, there’s no name.....”

It was Mana who murmured. The coral colored slender avatar’s long hair part slowly shook as she stood still. Ruka whispered lowly as she tightly embraced her shoulders.

“That’s why..... the guy riding that is also a monstermajimun. A small monsterguna majimun.....”

Almost the same time as those words reached Kuroyukihime’s ears—.

Three fierce impact sounds roared.

Two abandoned buildings on the west of the village were crushed together. The distance from the destroyer has been cut by a 100 meters. I must hold out until I see the true identity of that «Monster» before the immediate

withdrawal Crikin was saying. Kuroyukihime's indecisive moment lapsed as she decided and opened her mouth.

"Crikin, I've set-up a hung-up timer for me, Ruka and Mana when we dived."

"How long?"

"83 hours inside."

".....Well if that's calculated, those two won't go as far as total loss but.....—that means, Lotus..... ya' feel like fighting right?"

"The enemy's face is not seen from here and withdrawing is not my style. It doesn't matter if the three of you went ahead and withdraw."

".....Ya' haven't changed at all eh, «World End». Well then, I'll go out with ya'. No matter what monstah is there, we have a «King» here, we'll make it somehow."

Ruka and Mana stared intently as they embrace each other and soon shouted, having been overwhelmed on the fast conversation of those two.

"S-So CoooL!"

"Master and Onee-sama is so wonderful~!"

"Eh.....really? Well whatever, but I'm still on to older women....."

Crikin, who was reluctantly down, was hit by Kuroyukihime's right arm elbow.

"Here it comes!!"

After that, the last building that separates the four people and the destroyer vanished as if it exploded from its foundation.

Seeing it with their eyes as it appeared through the cloud dust, Kuroyukihime blurted out.

"D.....Dinosaur.....!?"

It has a pointed snout. It has a very large jaw. It has red glowing eyeballs from both sides. It has a shelled body supported by short thick legs along with the long tail. Its appearance resembled the ancient carnivores seen in a full dive biology class.

"It's formal name is legend class enemy «Nidhogg»."

A voice suddenly descended, Kuroyukihime quickly shifted her view upward.

In the back of the giant dragon, a fin sharply stretched out like a yacht's sail and in front of it, there was a small human figure— a standing Duel Avatar was seen. Is that it, the small monster Ruka was saying..... that is no doubt the Burst Linker that doesn't appear in the Matching List.

"You there.....Who the hell are you!"

The giant dragon's rider lightly moved his right hand on Kuroyukihime's sharp question. That hand was grasping a thin chain that glittered silver as it shook. Looking closely, the chains enclosed the dragon's snout like a band of leather tied together. It appeared exactly as a «Rein», that means it is an enhanced armament used to tame the legend class Nidhogg.

"My name would be unnecessary, it's a club rule....."

The absurd and melodious voice was cut short, shrugging his shoulder once again, the rider continued.

“.....No way, I didn’t think that I’ll come across at a big-shot at the ends of the earth like this. Nick sniffed out a smell of a huge prey and I came along to check it out to make sure, it turns out to be a big yes. At the very least, shouldn’t I leave something like a self-introduction?”

Kuroyukihime quickly analyzed the information contained on the words just now.

Of course this is just a rumor but, the tamed enemies will exhibit various abilities for their master. That dinosaur «Nidhogg» can find the target’s place from a long distance with its radar type ability. In other words, the rider summoned the legend enemy in this small town where Kuroyukihime herself is.

—As if sharply sensing her thoughts, Crikin lowly whispered beside her.

“It’s not your fault ya’ know. I mean..... we can rather say this is our chance, myOre-sama-chan’s sensing ability says so.”

“.....I’ll be expecting that.”

At the same time Kuroyukihime replied her short words, the mysterious Burst Linker at the dragon’s back lowered his head.

“Nice meet you, Black King. Also, to you locals. My name is «Sulfur Pot».....a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“.....Heh, finally identified yourself huh? I have been waiting for this day ya’ bastard since three months from when ya’ appeared! Listen well, Ore-sama-chan’s name is—”

Crikin stepped his half-cut column shaped simple foot as he was returning his introduction. But just before that,

“Ah, you don’t have to tell me. I’m not interested, you’ll all meet your end soon anyway.”

As the humiliating words descended, the «Strongest in History Name»’s misfiring ended. Crikin’s hands stirred as he trembled in anger and Kuroyukihime was once again in a high-speed thinking.

The avatar name «Sulfur Pot» is not familiar. That means that this person became a Burst Linker between the two and a half years of Kuroyukihime’s half-retired status. However, this overwhelming confidence demeanor was of a veteran that even made a bold move of taming a legend class enemy, it is naturally an impossible act for a newbie or a middle ranker. With a very dense combat experience, it is possible that he is a large scale legion’s back-up.

“——!!”

As her thought’s reach there at that moment, Kuroyukihime was finally able to remember the first memory inside her head like a wick lit by a spark.

«Guna majimun». That was how Ruka and the others call Sulfur Pot. The reason was because he doesn’t appear in the matching list. It is absolutely impossibly normally. One must be connected to the global net to dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field, the connected Burst Linker will definitely be registered on the list because it is Brain Burst’s fundamental principle.

However last year’s autumn, Kuroyukihime suffered greatly when the enemy disregarded the very principle. It was the current Nega Nebulas’ reliable member, Silver Crow’s tag partner Cyan Pile— Mayuzumi Takumu. He used a program given by his Burst Linker «Parent» and haunted Umesato’s local network like a ghost.

The situation is very similar. No, I can even say it’s the same.

Kuroyukihime sharply inhaled, faced the avatar glaring at everyone from five meters above the sky and threw that

word.

“—«Back Door Program».”

“.....”

Sulfur Pot's shoulder shook in surprise.

“.....I wonder what that is?”

The emanating voice kept calm and his upper body merely pitched forward. In that movement, the Avatar that was in the dorsal fin figure of the dragon till now was exposed to the sunlight of the Weathered stage and various shapes was exposed.

Sulfur— «Sulphur», bearing it in his name, the armor color was fairly bright yellow. If it was to be compared with the King of pure yellow color «Yellow Radio», it would be a little pale. Its thin body had an orthodox form but the shoulder, chest and waist are open with big eye-catching holes.

As the equipped mask and goggle face design looked like it was glaring, Kuroyukihime added to her words furthermore.

“No, that program should've been unavailable after the server update. However, you used a similar cheating technology no doubt. That means.....Sulfur Pot. Rather than being here in Okinawa, aren't you remotely diving from Tokyo!?”

On that instigation, there were three sets of initial reaction from the Okinawan group including Crikin.

“W-W-What ta' hell!?”

“OMGAkisamiyo!!”

“No way, unfair!!”

Hearing three shouting voices in succession, Sulfur Pot didn't even move a muscle. He slowly put back his body eventually and whisperingly spoke.

“.....I see, indeed. Even though you've shut yourself in a hole for many years, your fangs didn't fall out yet. Then I guess it can't be helped then, it wasn't it my plan but, you'll go out here, Black King. In a place like this, you're just a disappointing hindrance to our «Frontier Farming Experiment».”

Kuroyukihime had a low murmur in her mouth. The word that came out from Sulfur Pot's mouth was farming, «Agriculture»«Farm» in a dictionary and in addition, it also has a meaning in net-game terminology. A round the clock monster hunting to acquire a large quantity of gold and experience point. That's certainly the act that he is continuously doing in this land of Okinawa by making use of the giant dragon «Nidhogg».

To reiterate, it will be like this.

Sulfur Pot three months ago was probably the same as Kuroyukihime who visited Okinawa for a school trip and used the opportunity to devise some kind of cheat tool here in Henoko suburbs. Upon returning on Tokyo, he, who tamed Nidhogg beforehand, and companions remotely dived on Okinawa's Unlimited Neutral Field to hunt every living wild class and lesser class enemy. Eventually, he protected himself with the same logic as the former Cyan Pile that why no matter how many times Crikin and the others looked at matching list, there was no name in it. If the same was done in Tokyo, you'd be a target of large legion's suppression in a blink of an eye but in the far away Okinawa, you don't have to worry about it. Even during the stay of Kuroyukihime, Ruka and Mana risked their life attempting to contact her and if she didn't come, she wouldn't have thought on something such as diving in the

unlimited field.

“—Here are some once-in-a-lifetime words, Sulfur Pot. I have a great personal grudge on cheating tools, I’ll open-up all of your petty secrets here and render that unusable.”

Jakki! Kuroyukihime’s right-arm blade cleared away and she shouted with dignity.

“—Don’t think that Blue King is the only one that holds the title <<Legend Slayer>>! Come on, I’ll cut that thing into three pieces.”

As if her eloquent instigation was a raging fire, Sulfur Pot also changed his presence. With both eyes burning inside the round goggles, he responded in a voice with a low tone.

“.....Let me tell you this. Even my «Parent» doesn’t speak like that. I think I won’t kill you normally.....I’ll have Nick bite you off limb by limb and I’ll see if you can still stick with your bluff.”

The field’s atmosphere was suddenly became tensed and the temperature rose. They held their breath as the gust feature of the Weathered stage gave a sense of clash feeling.

Kuroyukihime took a glimpse at Crikin, who was preparing for battle beside her, and hurriedly whispered.

“Crikin, let’s do **that**.”

“Got ya”

With the crimson avatar’s short response, he changed to lively tone and instructed Ruka and Mana who was on the back.

“Young’uns, meOre-sama and Lotus will be the starting opponent of this big ball. It’ll be a big fight, ta’ surrounding buildings will break into rubbles one after another. So Ya’ guys, collect metal objects from those rubbles and gather them in this shopping district.”

“Ehhhh, we want to figh-.....”

A disappointed voice was raised from Ruka’s mouth but Mana quickly blocked it.

“We understand, master! It’s just picking up scraps, leave it to us~!”

“Ya’ better do it right, ta’ amount of iron ya’ll gather will decide this bout! —Here it comes!!”

Immediately afterward—.

“Haaa!!”

Sulfur Pot gave forth a yell along with the sharp hitting sound made by claspings the chains with his both hands. The dinosaur type enemy’s both eyes that was on standby till now glared red and exposed its numerous lined up ferocious fangs on its jaw—.

“Gruuoo!!”

The growl gushed like the rumbling earth and the giant dragon’s 20 meter span began to fiercely charge.

Part 10

Approximately 60 minutes of time in Accel World—, was a few seconds back in real time.

The shadow of the person watching from the pillar at the side of the elevator hall ran toward the dive space of the

resort hotel's second floor after the three people, Kuroyukihime, Ruka and Mana, went inside the booth.

The reception was automatically online, user's can be viewed from the booth's drawn layout and it is devised for choosing a private vacant space to rent. However, the pursuer checked for the location of the only booth for four that was occupied and went toward it without hesitation.

Far back at the place there was a closed door and naturally, it was locked. No voices can be heard from inside. The three users were probably in full dive. The pursuer touched the door and an electronic key input request dialog was displayed.

A white finger came from the sleeves of the thin parka and pressed the dialog's OPEN button. Originally, the door shouldn't have opened, but the lock was released along with a light sound. The finger was without change as the door pulled open. The slender body smoothly slipped inside the booth, the door closed once again and was locked.

The electronic key of this dive space was as common as the one used for each of the hotel rooms. Hence, strictly speaking, there was another person that holds the same key as Kuroyukihime. Sharing the room with her was Umesato Middle School Student Council Secretary, Wakamiya Megumi—.

What the booth intruding Megumi saw was three powerless bodies of girls with their eyes closed on the reclining chair facing each other.

Sitting alone on the left side was of course, Kuroyukihime. And on the right side, there seems to be two younger girls. The tanned faces were not familiar at all and they were wearing Sailor uniforms with a common design, they weren't Umesato students but children attending a school in Henoko.

Being aware at that instant, Megumi's face was strained crumpled and she tightly bit her lips.

The Kuroyukihime that Megumi knows is sociable but in reality, the wall in her heart was fairly tall and thick. She basically wouldn't allow any interaction on a person, hidden within her beauty was something terrible and a very restricted cynical and childish face that people knows of.

That girl probably met these local kids through direct connection and full dived through a wired connection using a router. There are no other reasons that can be thought of except one.

«Another World».

The living half of Kuroyukihime, the real side, was concealed in a foreign place. The two girls were inhabitants of that world and probably as of now, they visited that place together with Kuroyukihime. Megumi foolishly step into the world which she was not even allowed to know the name, let alone to take a glimpse of it. The time was supposed to be used for choosing a souvenir for Megumi.

Her left hand was trembling, she raised it and moved to Kuroyukihime's Neuro Linker.

She touched the XSB cable with her fingertips from the piano-black exterior shell and stiffly pinched it.

.....If I pull this out, she'll come back. Probably, it will be something important that will hurt her forever, but she'll come back to me from that place that I couldn't reach—.....

『Don't do it!』

Suddenly, she felt someone's voice ringing inside her head.

Blinking in a flash, she looked at the three's faces, everyone was still on full dive. Their eyelids are tightly closed and there wasn't even a quiver in their lips. On the built in router on the low table, the indicator shows that all three lines

were still in contact with global net.....

At that time, Megumi finally noticed. There were not only three cables. The fourth XSB cable extends from the router, but the plug at the other side was left on the table.

『That is.....a door. Just for once, the door is inviting you their place. Now then.....』

A young yet mysterious dignified voice guided, Megumi moved away from Kuroyukihime's cable and reached for the low table with her right hand. She picked up the fourth XSB cable and brought the plug near her neck.

An unidentified line wired connection is an act that causes big problem in security. Megumi knew enough about that but, there wasn't a hint of hesitation just now. The plug was connected to that floral pink Neuro Linker and a wired connection notice rose on her vision, and then.

In the table right in front of Megumi, a book visually appeared without making any sound. Though that object looked real, it was not even a 3D object but, there was certainly something there.

"Haa....."

A faint sigh spilled from her lips. This is..... This really is the book that I loved long ago. I have read it for so many times, but this is the book with a story that I can't remember. Suddenly vanishing and unable to find it again, this important book.....

Megumi sat down next to Kuroyukihime and softly reached her hand to the large hard covered book. There was no title on the cover. However, there were countless colors combined in an arabesque like pattern.

Timidly, she flipped the cover.

On the first page, there was only a horizontal text written in english. Written in deep black ink, it was a charm. It was the magic word to visit the book's world. Megumi took a deep breath, as if she was to sing, as if she was to pray, she spoke of the phrase that was consisting of two words.

«Unlimited Burst»

Part 12

"Neenee~! Come to OkinawaUchina again 'kay~!!"

"Onee-sama~, take care~~~!!"

At the main entrance of the resort hotel, the two girls wearing sailor uniform who almost shred off their waving hands, took a deep breath, prepared their timing,

"FarewellNjichabira~~~!!"

And shouted.

Kuroyukihime, who was waving her hands from the bus' window, returned to her seat as the two's figure disappeared into the cock spur bushes, 'Fuuh' and she let out a long breath. Perhaps, the young man with the shikuwasā(probably) juice can that looked like a high schooler leaning on the bench a little far away from the two of them was the real Crikin, I think, I'll stop the in depth investigation here.

"Even in this place you've made some cute fans out there, that's just like you, Hime."

As the smiling Megumi said that on the seat beside her, *ehem* she cleared her throat in refute.

“T-They are not like fans or sort but.....it’s something like, a school cultural exchange.....”

“Okay fine, I’ll write it on the Student Council Log then.”

“Uh, no, that’s a bit.....”

Thursday, April 18th, 10 o’clock in the morning.

The 61 students of Umesato Middle School was on two large Electronic VehicleEV buses separately riding from Henoko heading to Yontou. Though going back to Tokyo was scheduled for Saturday evening, the school trip is finally at the latter half. The other students were feeling more excited toward the climax of the journey however, for Kuroyukihime, who was dead tired, she felt like resting only for today at least. Anyhow, the battle with the legend class enemy at the land of Henoko wasn’t something expected to be experienced as an optional tour.

That was also supposed to be for Wakamiya Megumi who was sitting at the left-side but, she was completely at her usual smiling face while flipping through the Yontou virtual guide. It seems like that Megumi, let alone the incident on the Unlimited Neutral Field, it is like she cannot even remember visiting the dive booth of Kuroyukihime, Ruka and Mana.

Yesterday evening, Kuroyukihime, bursting out after accomplishing her goal, discovered Megumi with her eyes closed beside her on the sofa instead of Ruka and Mana who has left. She shook her for the time being and the girl soon opened her eyes, with a puzzled face she curiously said ‘Why am I here?’.

After that, they went back to their room, changed clothes to eat dinner, went into the bath and till they were about to sleep, Megumi didn’t mention anything about Accel world even once, Kuroyukihime felt that she appeared to have modestly changed.

After dinner, upon returning to their room, Kuroyukihime directly connected to Megumi for the so titled ‘Student Council related important files synchronization’ and secretly confirmed if she have it on her local memory. However the BB program did not exist there. After all, this girl was once a Burst Linker and with a some kind of logic, she once again opened the door to Accel World that I still don’t understand how even now.

However Kuroyukihime feels that it is okay. Surely that meeting given by this mysterious island of Okinawa is a moment of pure miracle.....

Those thoughts were broken by the blinking incoming text mail icon at the upper part of her vision. Kuroyukihime opening it, the sender was Crikin and its contents are information about the discovery of a deserted dive cafe at the town’s outskirts.

Illegally remodeled Neuro Linker with unequipped startup and global net connection function. Sulfur Pot confessed that during his visit in Henoko on January for a School trip, he hid it on the sofa of the dive cafe which was from the higher-ups of their «Organization». Perhaps that Neuro Linker was a custom «Backdoor Program» device. The program should now be disabled after using the BB center server patch but, in the case that patch somehow examines the existence of BB program inside the Neuro Linker, there is a possibility that it has a way to bypass it.

In that Neuro Linker, not just the back door but the real brain burst installation will be cleared.

For such an unreasonable boldness, it is a chilling terrible way. It’s because in order to prepare on putting the BB program in a Neuro Linker, there would be a real attack extortion..... also, a «Child» would be made without any explanation because there is no way to have a Neuro Linker immediately accept it.

Sulfur Pot also talked about the remote diving plot, but in relation with their «Organization», he didn’t even try to crack his mouth. Furthermore, the moment Kuroyukihime was thinking of killing him continuously, the automatic

disconnection safety activated, that's where he got away.

According to Crikin's mail, by the time he found the ownerless Neuro Linker, the power was cut off with the memory and even physically went to self-destruction. They're truly a very bold and cautious «Organization». Either way, there will be a time where I'll be able to hit them from the front.

—Well, I'll mercilessly crush them at that time.

Muttering in her thoughts, Kuroyukihime closed the mailer and a cup with rising steam was held out beside her. From the its aroma, it was black tea with citrus flavor additive. She gratefully accepted it and said her thanks.

“Thank you, Megumi.”

“Your welcome.”

Her close friend softly smiled, slightly changed her facial expression and continued with a low voice.

“Hey, Hime.”

“N?”

“I think, I'll write a story with Okinawa as its setting when we get back to Tokyo. A story about the sea, a dragon, mermaids..... and a swordsman wearing a black Kimono. You know yesterday, I dreamed about that.”

“.....I see.”

Kuroyukihime smiled, Megumi softly placed her right hand over her own left hand.

“Of course, I'll be the first reader right?”

“Fufu, then you should be prepared. 'Cause it will be quite long.”

“Yeah, I'm looking forward to it. Also, I'm looking forward for the souvenir Megumi bought for me. What could it be.....uumu, my cosmic intuition says.....”

“Ah, you can't do that Hime! What will you do if you really got it right?”

“Mmmm.....I see it! It is.....!”

“No, I said you can't! If you say any more, I'll give you a rub!”

Above the heads of the two girls who were having fun, two carry bag were lined up at the luggage shelves above their head.

Inside Kuroyukihime's bag, there was a Sakuragai in a cherry blossom flower form handicraft necklace.

And in Megumi's bag, a black Choukai in a black swallowtail butterfly handicraft necklace was inside.

The two of them presented it at the student council room, there was a big surprise to their magnificent agreement, followed by lots of smiles on their faces with stories about the several days that passed.

References

1. ↑ Black Lotus (ブラック・ロータス) broken down as Bla(ブラ) cklo(ックロ) tus(ータス) to emphasize “クロ”

from cklo(ツクロ). “クロ” as in 黒 meaning black.

Accel World: Volume 10 Chapter 3

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Versus

(Roppongi, April 2026)

“Heh..... So this is the «Fourth Generation FullDive Experimental Machine».”

I muttered while looking up at the huge enshrined hexahedron in front of me.

The bare aluminum surface was shining dully, with growling sounds from several of the large cooling fans that were lined up. One side of it was linked to the gel bed, the headrest was covered by a protruding crude helmet-based interface.

“So huge, weren’t the machines used in the early days of the amusement parks smaller than this, Higa-san?”

I turned around and said to the man at the control console. The operator raised his face, shrugged and replied,

“Even so, Kirigaya-kun, this is already compact compared to the original estimate. Besides, the specs of the first generation at the olden days’ game centers weren’t much different from Mega Drive or Dream Cast.”

“.....I never saw either of the real machines though.....”

“Well, then let’s have life songs! This time at my apartment, it’ll be a strictly reggae camp.....”

And the man who blurted out strange things was — Higa Takeru, the researcher responsible for the development of the world’s state-of-the-art VR machine. Looking at him from the outside, it would be hard to believe, as his hairstyle stuck out thinly like a pin holder, he wore big rounded glasses, and his T-shirt had a game character printed on it. It would be hundred times more matching for him to be in the vicinity of the shops in Akihabara than this gloomy hi-tech room.

But even though I say that, I was still in uniform after school time too.

Why was I — Kirigaya Kazuto, here at the harbor ward in Roppongi, in the laboratory of a certain venture company? The reason was simple, it was just a part-time job.

From the first-generation of the large scale amusement machine, to the second generation NerveGear or AmuSphere, then to the third generation medical equipment, the FullDive machines have evolved. Of course, anyone can use it, but there were some with a certain degree of adaptability. That is, their brains could connect to the machine with a high efficiency rate. And in addition to the innate aptitude, the experience could be improved during a long Dive.

Then in Japan, no, the entire world, the group of people who held the longest Dive time was without a doubt, the «Survivors» from «SAO incident» which concluded one and a half years ago.

This fourth generation machine has been developed under the leadership of Higa Takeru, the level of connection

precision was overwhelming compared to the machines up until now. That high specs led to the unexpected problem. Because the amount of information that had to be exchanged with the brain was too great, even with all the staff including Higa-san himself, they were unable to collect data from the test Dive to a satisfactory level due to the «VR Sickness» — was what he said.

At that point, Higa-san used a certain connection to request one of the «Survivors», me, to be a test Diver as a part-time job, I came here to Roppongi after I confirmed the daily wages, and that was it.

“—Anyway, I am to FullDive with this, then once in there I just move here and there, right?”

I asked for affirmation while stroking the chilled aluminum exterior, Higa-san nodded in consent.

“Oh, I need to warn you that I can see the graphics inside just as you do, like a voyeur. As I’m still developing the mechanism to adjust the connection depth in accordance to a Diver’s ability, someone has to dive, or else I can’t get the data, hahaha.”

“.....Well, because I get paid, doing anything is fine.....but before that, I need affirmation for one thing please.”

I glanced at the strong headgear interface and continued,

“Erm, there won’t be any danger during the Dive..... Is that right?”

“Of course of course of course!”

Higa-san nodded deeply after saying that three times.

“Kirigaya-kun is an SAO survivor, I understand your feelings. It’s alright, danger from the machine developed by me, there’s only a little!”

“Is that so, I’m relieved to hear tha...”

Swallowing the words I was about to say, I looked at Higa-san again.

“.....«there’s only a little»?”

“Nonono, It’s alright It’s alright It’s alright!”

After saying that three times each, Higa-san continued in a rapid whisper.

“.....Just that, if the power dropped during the Dive, then ‘that’ for a moment.....”

“What is ‘that’.....?”

“Nono, no problem! We have two support power sources, and an emergency battery is already equipped too!”

“Please explain ‘that’ instead.....”

“Nonono, no problem! There’s no real harm! It just, erm, a bit, how to say it.....”

Higa-san rolled his eyes behind the rounded glasses while stepped closer, my glance was fixed on him.

“.....How to say it, well, it might appear, just that.”

“.....What will appear?”

“Hahaha, it’s not good Kirigaya-kun. There are things we must not talk about, like bonuses or toilets. In a place like

this, the thing that will appear is of course 'that', hahaha."

After saying that, Higa-san hung both hands loosely in front of his chest. That behavior finally let my brain realize what 'that' means.

"Hah.....? G..Ghost.....?"

What is this person saying?, I thought while still staring at Higa-san, who shook his head again and said,

"It's real, very real, Kirigaya-kun! I actually saw it!Well, as you can see, this experimental unit is still the only machine in the world, so there is only a single person during the Dive. But..... the staff saw a silhouette of a person on the grass many times during the test field dive."

Higa-san said with an expression that should have the thin vertical lines over his forehead if this was a manga.

I had a serious look for a moment, then it was replaced by a bitter smile. I shrugged my shoulders.

"It must be because of the VR sickness, probably the illusions from light effect? Or it could be a bug in the shader program."

"No—! There is no way such a bug could appear in the program this genius Higa had participated in creating!"

For some reason, his tone suddenly changed to be like a foreigner's, but I ignored it and moved my shoulders again.

"Still, the ghost didn't even come out to this room..... About ghosts appearing in the VR world, while in Aincrad when I heard rumors and went to check, it was just an NPC anyway."

That of course, was about the existence of the top-down AI «Yui» who was my and Asuna's «Daughter». She would get angry if I tell her that I was searching for a ghost at first.

".....In other words, everything seen in the other side is all digital code, the existence must be written somewhere in the memory address. By examining the log of the corresponding test Diving time, you can see what the Diver saw....."

After I said that, Higa-san made a pointed mouth like a child.

"Of course I checked it, but there was nothing in the log. Which means, it was certainly not an object from the main program of the experimental machine. Then it was really a ghost, or....."

".....Or?"

".....Err, this talk is at the level Kirigaya-kun is not supposed to know, so don't let anyone know you heard it, alright?"

With a strict preface, Higa-san continued,

"At the heart of this experimental machine is «Quantum Operation Circuit», the so-called quantum computer."

".....That was also Higa-san's creation?"

"Oh yea, was what I wanted to say, but its basic foundation was actually what Kayaba-senpai left behind. Well anyway, it is possible that the quantum computer could interfere with a parallel world, well..... the Sci-Fi world."

".....That..is really true?"

The tone in my question had changed, Higa-san, half agreeing and half disagreeing, shook his head.

“I hope I know that for certain too, but if it’s true, then it would explain the ghost phenomenon. That is, this experimental machine, for some reason……, interfered with the same kind of the machine in the past or the future from a different time flow, then it could be possible to see the shadow of another Diver…….”

“.....Somehow this is very different from a real ghost, isn’t it”

I shrugged my shoulder again, then glanced at the clock at the wall.

“Appearing or not, we will only know during the Dive anyway.Today my little sister will make something, I will be in trouble if I came back after dinner time. So let’s start…….”

“Heh, Kirigaya-kun has little sisters!? How many!?”

Higa-san’s reaction made me feel a strange sense of déjà vu, I ignored the question and sat on the bed of the experimental machine. I lay my body to fit its recesses then slid my head inside the headgear.

“OK, I’m ready.”

I said to Higa-san, whose face still showed lingering disappointment. Closing my eyes, the sound of a motor could be heard, the final explanation reached my ears,

“.....Then, commencing connection. Avatar will be Kirigaya-kun’s «Self-image» that is automatically generated, so it won’t cause discomfort.”

“Understood.”

I raised my left thumb in response. At the same time, a low growl could be heard from the back of the experimental machine.

* * *

—————*Again.*

Feeling strange fluctuations in his field of vision, Arita Haruyuki narrowed the eyes of his pink pig avatar.

«Burst Link» command allows one to enter the world dyed in transparent blue, the basic accelerated space «Blue World».

Equipped in Haruyuki’s neck was the quantum communication device «Neuro Linker». And installed even deeper inside was the mystery application «Brain Burst». When FullDiving in this transparent blue field, the BB program accelerates Haruyuki’s command reactions one thousand fold.

The basic accelerated space was for searching the matching list to find opponents, or to start external applications to do various work, the reason for Haruyuki being «Accelerated» was for the latter. That was — for the submission of today’s homework, to be more precise, the postponed time left was fifteen real life minutes. The Japanese history class during the fifth period had given out the report homework, and of course, the storage region of his brain had forgotten about it even after he registered it in the scheduler application.

Because this was neither mathematics nor English homework, the last resort of asking Takumu or Chiyuri for their homework photograph in order to copy it wasn’t an option — Even though the costly loan, without a doubt, would be collected later — it was better than having to write the essay report.

Therefore, consuming a precious one burst point to «Accelerate», he battered intently at the holographic keyboard.

However,

His thoughts shook and swayed when he lifted his face due to the odd observation reflected in his field of vision, in the middle of the empty blue classroom,

“.....What.....?”

He muttered when his avatar dropped from the chair. He stared ahead a few steps between the rows of the desk, and part of the blackboard waved faintly again. It was — like there was something transparent moving between Haruyuki and the blackboard.

In fact, this wasn't his first time coming in contact with such phenomenon. Recently, here — about a month ago, sometimes during FullDive he could see the strange fluctuations as well. Moreover, it wasn't in the normal VR world, only while «Accelerated».

However, today's clarity of the phenomenon was unusual. Haruyuki had forgotten about his homework, he stared intently.

Then he immediately noticed something.

“.....A person?”

Yes, a fluctuation at the spot in the classroom looked like the silhouette of a human, as if there was a completely transparent human standing there.

But that shouldn't be the case.

The blue basic accelerated space was, as a general rule, the world only for a person who uttered the «Burst Link» command. For two or more to Dive at the same time, both sides must be using a direct connection on the Neuro Linker and use the accelerate command at the same time. But of course, at the moment, Haruyuki wasn't directly connected to anyone.

.....That means.

“.....G..Ghost?”

Scared by the word he inadvertently murmured. Haruyuki tried to retreat to the back of the classroom, but at that time.

The clear shadow started approaching him at the same time!

“Hi,hiiii—!!”

Screaming, while dashing back at a high speed, he unconsciously tried to shout the acceleration halt command.

“B-B-B-B-Burst Ou.....”

But he stopped his steps at that point.

This is not the real world, it is the polygon world created by the image of the Neuro Linkers from the social cameras. Everything reflected in the eyes are all the digital data which could be substituted with the code. Therefore, there must be a reason for the existence of that shadow too, there is no ghost, ghost is just a lie.

Haruyuki thought recklessly while hiding behind the last row of the desk. *Something that looks like human shadow — what is it? There must be a way to verify it. Assuming it is just other human, this is not a normal VR space but the accelerated space, I didn't Burst Link with that «Someone». Then if I connect to the network with the same Burst*

Linker——

“T-That’s right…… T-T-The name will come up from the Matching List.”

Haruyuki murmured with dry lips. He then quickly hit the «B» icon displayed at the top left of the virtual desktop, the Brain Burst Console screen expanded, he moved the tab to open the Matching List.

On top of the list is my name, then it should be the classmates Takumu «Cyan Pile» and Chiyuri «Lime Bell». In addition, at the lounge of the school cafeteria, is KuroyukiHime «Black Lotus». These four are the only existing Burst Linkers in this Umesato middle school.

Yet.

Floating on the fifth row, the wriggled set of dots was blurred like it was written in ink.

That spot of light, for some reason, didn’t take form of the characters immediately. Haruyuki held his breath and watched while trembling intensely, then, he blinked —— a few alphabets finally formed.

There was a fixed form to the Duel Avatar’s name, but that name didn’t take the «Color Name» form, it was just a row of six characters.

“K……I, R, I……, T……O……?”

——Kirito?

Who is he……?

As if to trace his thoughts, Haruyuki’s right hand automatically moved.

He hit the mysterious Burst Linker name, «KIRITO», causing the «DUEL» option to pop through the window, then touched the «YES» affirmation dialog.

The blue classroom melted and disappeared as if it collapsed.

While passing through the space of darkness, Haruyuki’s pig avatar was surrounded by the light and changed its shape, The big helmet with thin limbs, silvery white Duel Avatar «Silver Crow».

On both sides of the upper part of his vision, green stamina gauges extended, and the «1800» time count was engraved in the middle.

And finally the flaming text «FIGHT» shone brightly before exploding.

Once his stiff feet touched the surface of the battlefield, Haruyuki quickly raised his face.

‘Someone’ stood in front, slightly away from him.

Duel Avatar —— no, that isn’t it. He thought.

As far as Haruyuki knew, the avatar of each Burst Linker had the appearance of a robot-like hardness. While some wore cloth, there were no flesh and blood faces across the board.

But this ‘someone’ who stood in front of him clearly had a human’s appearance.

A male, with slightly long hair, his sharp eyes were jet black. He seemed to be slightly older than Haruyuki, wearing a black leather longcoat, thimble gloves on his hands, and boots on his feet. Then —— suspended on his back were two long swords.

“.....Swords!?”

Murmuring in a hoarse voice, Haruyuki put some more distance between them.

There was no mistake, it was familiar in the fantasy game genre, the so-called «Long Sword». The handles were black and silvery white respectively, although they were polygons, he could tell from the radiance of the texture that they would be very heavy. He felt that the presence of blades within those scabbards were genuine.

That was not a Duel Avatar, but he didn't think it was the harmless FullDive avatar either.

While cautiously observing his opponent, Haruyuki took a deep breath and shouted,

“Who are you.....!? How exactly did you connect to the Umesato Local Network!?”

The voice tinged with effect echoed throughout the field, but the black dressed swordsman was still motionless.

Disregard that — rather, it was as if the voice wasn't received in the first place.

Looking closely, the outline of the swordsman avatar was misted like smoke, was it disembodied? — Was it just the image being sent from somewhere? Haruyuki thought that, and to verify it, he took a step closer.

At the same moment, the swordsman made his move too. The black shiny boot made a step forward, it stepped on the small pebble on the stage ground, causing a sound.

“——!!”

Not the virtual image!

Haruyuki jumped backwards in panic again, he raised both hands in a guarding stance.

As if being induced by that movement, tension ran through the face of the swordsman, his right hand quickly grabbed the handle of the black sword behind his back.

* * *

——*Where exactly is this place?*

——*And, who is that!?*

I earnestly kept repeating these two questions in my mind.

The prior lecture from the operator, Higa-san, was that the Dive field would be a peaceful grassland, but the scenery spread around me was the complete opposite.

The cracked ground, the concrete buildings that had partly collapsed, flames came out of their openings, And — the starless night sky. It was just like the world after civilization had collapsed.

If the only existence here was me, it would be just an error in the quantum circuit, which I suspected caused my consciousness to jump to the future Tokyo. But fortunately, there was a human shadow just a few meters in front of me.

The silhouette was surely human's, the head was like a big helmet, all of the body was covered in metal armor. The reflection from the bonfire sparkled on that silvery body, which was very slender compared to its big head. It was unthinkable that there would be a human inside it. Furthermore, its back was carrying something that looked like the

radiating fins.

“Robot.....?”

I murmured. As I stepped closer to verify it, the sole of my boots stepped on some rubble causing a sound.

At that moment, the silvery robot quickly jumped backwards — both hands moved forward into a guarding position.

It had no weapons, but the tip of its sharp fingers glittered. It would be plausible that it had some strong weapons hidden. When I thought that, my right hand moved automatically over my shoulder, grabbing the grip of the sword hung on my back.

——Sword?

Then I finally realized that I wasn't Kirigaya Kazuto, the high school student in the real world, but Kirito, the swordsman from the nostalgic SAO period.

Higa said that when I dive, the avatar would be created from my self-image. In other word, currently I wasn't in my own flesh and blood body, but the «Black Swordsman» which shouldn't exist anywhere anymore, I almost made a bitter smile at this thought. However, I wasn't in the situation to do that. Why did the mysterious robot make that stance with both hands? Right, I also grabbed the handle of my sword. I was in a somewhat dangerous situation with this robot.

If I pulled out the sword like this, the robot would attack without a doubt. But it would be hard to prevent that while I'm standing in this awkward form anyway. The fighting spirit is emitting from it and such things don't exist in soulless NPC or monsters. In other word, there must be a real human moving it.

Within the intense atmosphere, I decided to take a chance with words,

“.....Um, who are you? This place is my company's closed network. Where are you from and for what purpose are you connecting here?”

But there was no answer, *Looks as if that thing can't hear my voice, then how about gesturing? But to do that in this situation would be difficult. If I move my right hand even slightly, the robot in front of me might jump immediately. The tension of the atmosphere in the space between us is so tense.*

——Yeah, I was in the wrong the moment I grabbed my sword, but you are a bit too aggressive too!

That was what I complained in my mind. The silvery robot had penetrated the company's protective firewall into the experimental machine, it was clearly illegal hacking. Then wouldn't it be more appropriate to be a bit more sneaky.....

When I thought to this point.

After a long time, I finally noticed the indicators fixed at the top of my field of vision.

At the center was the digital figure, the current [1740] had been decreased by one second. Then on both sides, the green shining bars, lined up in parallel with the thin blue bars.

Under the left side bar was the engraved character string [KIRITO]. No matter how I look at it, it was my name — The Login ID I passed to Higa-san before the Dive.

Then under the right bar was the brightly shining [SILVER CROW] name.

“Silver.....Crow.....”

I soundlessly murmured that, it was no doubt the name of the silvery robot in front of me.

The components of this 'screen', and this situation.

I widened my eyes to the revelation that I suddenly realized.

This is — this world is clearly not the peaceful test field at all.

It was a «Battle Field». Currently I was in a nostalgic game, I Dived into the so-called fighting game!

Higa-san said there was a certain degree of possibility that the quantum circuit mounted within the experimental machine could interfere with the world on a different time flow. If so, then this place may be the world in 1990's era when fighting games were at its peak? No, it can't be. For that era, the 'F' of the FullDive didn't even exist yet. Then is this the future? I don't know how many years into the future, but fighting games will be back in the spotlight in the future?

"Hey, You.....Silver Crow."

Forgetting the fact that my voice wouldn't reach my opponent, I continued saying,

"Is this place within a fighting game? What is the title.....?"

While I was asking,

I carelessly stepped forward while my hand was still on the grip of my sword.

The reaction was — immediate.

The left foot of the silvery robot avatar kicked the ground, and while I was surprised, the thin body closed in on my bosom like a streak of lightning.

* * *

The left foot had decided due to its own reflexes, and a corner in Haruyuki's head yelled *Crap*—.

The approaching action of the opponent might not have been for attacking purposes, as the sword wasn't pulled out, and he wasn't even in a proper stance with his bosom wide open.

But it was no longer possible to cancel the ultra high speed attack command set by Haruyuki's consciousness. The Silver Crow avatar rushed in at full speed, and threw a preemptive right middle kick aimed towards the flank of the swordsman dressed in black.

Originally, Haruyuki's fighting style wasn't this decisively aggressive. Looking at how he fought his early opponents, he seemed to be gradually changing based on attributes and techniques he gained over time.

In addition, the one in front of him, the strange duel avatar without a color name and with his exposed flesh and blood face, his only feature was the black covering his entire body. If it were red or blue, he might have been controlled from somewhere close by, however, this wasn't the case for black. He should have asked KuroyukiHime-senpai for the characteristics of «Black», but since he was already in the confrontation, it was too late now.

Even against an opponent with unknown characteristics, Haruyuki's preemptive attack with just an insignificant action was — clearly, the swordsman in black, «KIRITO»'s tremendous pressure's fault.

If anything, his slender physique, the still developing face that could be called a boy's, but just how he was standing

with his hand on the sword grip made Haruyuki's throat dry from the constant feeling of intense pressure. It was likely from a level 7 or 8 High Ranker — no, higher than that, probably the tension of facing those «Kings» one-on-one.

If the mysterious swordsman had opened a small chance, Haruyuki would rather retreat to hide and ascertain the situation in the narrow path of the «End of the Century» stage. But there was nothing that could be called an opening from the swordsman — «Kirito». Haruyuki was afraid that his head might fly off from a sudden attack if he tried to retreat, however slightly.

Therefore, as soon as Kirito had taken a casual step, Haruyuki charged ahead with all of his outburst energy.

—But, things have already reached this point, then there's no other choice!

Haruyuki swallowed the depressing thought the moment he drew up the kick.

When facing a fellow Burst Linker, do not «Battle» earnestly. That was what his teacher, and at the same time his 'parent', Black Lotus had taught him. If the middle right kick strikes, it would disrupt the opponent's stance, then the rest would be just to continue rushing at close range without giving any chance for him to pull the sword from his back. And finishing him off with an aerial dive attack when the special move gauge had accumulated to the halfway point.

The first attack loaded with those kind of intentions passed through the opponent's abdomen like a silvery arc in the dark night—

With a light sound, only a button of the coat went flying into the sky.

“Wh.....”

While adjusting his balance, Haruyuki forcibly exhaled.

It's impossible. Given the short interval, and that he wasn't in a proper stance, blocking should be difficult enough, but he evaded it completely.

Haruyuki eyes wide opened in confusion. At the same time, the boy's right arm flashed, and with a bright metallic sound, he drew out his jet black long sword.

* * *

It was at an amazing speed.

The silvery white avatar «Silver Crow»'s rush with his middle right kick slipped past my abdomen, its movement was ultra smooth as if it had been repeatedly practiced thousands of times.

However, due to its smoothness, I could feel where the first attack was aimed at.

The one moving Silver Crow was a living human, there's no mistake about it. Then, when the human operates the avatar, there will be the tiny bits of information exposed from its movement which didn't exist in monsters. The significant ones are heart beats, toe direction, waist height, and gaze.

For a duel in SAO, it would be fatal to get hit by a single strike, so it was very important to read the opponent's movement in advance. Therefore when needing to fight with an evenly skilled person, any move fired from a long distance must be avoided at almost a hundred percent rate. Jumping moves need to be blocked, as evading might leave an opening, and a favorite special move is sure to be inserted in between the flow of continuous attacks that

followed.

From that perspective, the Silver Crow's middle kick speed was, without a doubt, marvelous. But its movements gave out too much information at the initial moments, I could feel the intention to hit my left flank, so I dashed backwards with all my strength. Settling it with just a single coat button sent flying was already considered lucky.

It seemed like Crow didn't expect the attack to be evaded, the swing caused the upper part of the body to lose its balance. That was a good opportunity, because, even though I positively thought it wasn't a situation I should fight in, my right hand automatically moved to pull out one of my beloved swords — «Elucidator».

“Shi.....”

While feeling the nostalgic weight in my hand, I quickly swung down the sword. With a thin band of blue light, the blade cut into Silver Crow's right shoulder.

* * *

“Ah.....”

Haruyuki let leak a weak sound, staring at the looming sharp edge.

Unable to evade, and it couldn't be blocked with an arm either. Kirito's motion from drawing the sword until slashing didn't look powerful at all, it looked so natural, yet the enormous amount of power that was put on the blade made Haruyuki feel like receiving an electric shock through his avatar.

The metallic colors, like Silver Crow, had some resistance to slashing attacks. But he felt it was of no use against this sword, so in that case, he had to make sure to take minimal damage from it.

Although the battle had just begun, Haruyuki's consciousness had started to «Hyper Accelerate» as if he was already at the edge of the jaws of death. The closing blade seemed to slow down slightly, Haruyuki bent his knees, dropping his avatar down at the same time as the incoming slashing vector. The black shiny blade touched his right shoulder's armor, causing pretty orange sparks to fly in all directions. As he had expected, the sword wouldn't stop there, the crack ripped apart Haruyuki's silver armor faster than the speed at which he descended, one centimeter, two centimeters was cut by the blade. At this rate even if he fell down to the ground, the sword wouldn't stop and his right arm would surely be cut off. —But,

“.....Now!!”

The HP gauge was reduced by the damage to the shoulder, and a similar proportion of the special move gauge had filled up with a shiny glow. Haruyuki then converted it to flying force, the silver wings took shape in the form of commas on his back.

At that time, the falling posture gained backwards thrust——

Silver Crow body had only slid by fifty centimeters, but the sword had separated from the cut in the right shoulder.

“.....Oooooo!!”

Roaring, Haruyuki kicked the ground with all his might, and jumped a large distance back.

* * *

——*What happened!?*

Feeling the impact from the point of sword biting into empty ground, I held my breath.

The black blade of the Elucidator had caught the shoulder of Silver Crow, there was no mistake about it. It hit the seams of the armor I aimed at, and I was sure just a breath more and it would have been cut off. But the silvery robot suddenly gained backwards momentum and fled away with a cut wound about two centimeters deep.

Such behavior wouldn't be possible in that situation. That completely different movement, it was as if it was being pulled from the back with some wires.

I looked up quickly, staring at the more than ten meters in distance the avatar took in just the blink of an eye.

Of course, there were no wires attached to its body, and I couldn't see any opening Jet holes either.

——*No.*

Folded on the back of Crow were thin metal fins. Did they tremble a split second before the back dash?

If the secret behind the impossible maneuver was those fins, then my initial assumption that they were radiating fins was incorrect —— It must be some sort of propulsion system. But if that was the case, why didn't it use them from the start?

When I thought up to that point, I noticed a slight change from all sorts of information displayed in my field of vision.

First, the Silver Crow's stamina gauge on the upper right had decreased a little, around three percent.

Then, my stamina gauge on the upper left was still full, and the thin blue gauge beneath it had slightly emitted light.

So this field was in compliance with those antique fighting games like I expected, the meaning of the blue gauge was obvious. The «Special Move», no doubt about it. Then this gauge probably charges based on the amount of damage taken. In other word, when Silver Crow was damaged by my sword, the gauge began to accumulate at the same moment, I suspect consuming it created a driving force from the fins on its back. Conversely, if it couldn't charge the special move gauge, Silver Crow wouldn't be able to use those fins anymore.

——But, in that case, what was my «Special Move» when I didn't have that kind of equipment on my back?

Now that I was using the avatar of «Dual Blades» Kirito and with the two beloved swords, my self-image —— In other words, it was created from my memory. If they worked in this fighting game's system, the special moves should be awakened from my memory as well. Then, asking what I will take as special move, I can promptly reply. It's nothing other than «Sword Skill».

I put my right foot forward, set the sword behind, and assumed a basic one-handed straight sword skill «Sonic Leap» stance. Doing so caused the sword to growl faintly, at the same time the shining part of the special move gauge blinked, and then abruptly stopped. This meant the gauge wasn't enough to use the move.

“.....I get it now.”

I murmured while looking again at the opponent in front of me.

From the reaction of Silver Crow, and from the scene composition, I was apparently the trespasser in this situation.....no, «Intruder» was a more suitable term. It seemed Crow played in this game stage daily, and I, no, the fourth generation experimental machine's quantum circuit had interfered. I wanted to immediately log out and complain a great deal to Higa for making such a dangerous thing, but there was no log out button in the field of vision, and I didn't know any commands for those purposes either.

But since this was inside a fighting game, once the «Battle» had ended, the connection should be cut off.

If that was the case, it wasn't my hobby to stand still eating the attacks until my stamina gauge was completely depleted either.

Why? I was the «Intruder». It is an appropriate manner to break through using my full power, isn't it?

Since I have been thrown out into this stage, my mouth made a faint smile for the first time.

The switch inside my head made a 'click' changing sound.

* * *

The moment the unknown identity Burst Linker «Kirito» made a little smile, Haruyuki felt goosebumps on his virtual skin. The pain from his right shoulder's wound suddenly disappeared.

Holding his ground against the intense pressure that blew by, the desire to retreat rose up within him.

Kirito had intruded the Umesato Local Network, but it was Haruyuki who saw the name in the matching list and applied the duel mode. Picking the fight then retreating wasn't an option for him, as a member of the legion «Nega Nebulas».

—This is not a situation to be scared of! If we can't talk, then the only way to collect information from him is to use fists directly — but since that side has a sword — is there any other way?

At the same time he heard himself saying that, he felt something burning deep inside him.

Kirito's reaction to avoid his full speed middle kick was the fastest he had ever seen fighting with duel avatars up until this point. Wanting to see that movement again, and then surpassing it.

Clenching both his fists hard, Haruyuki decided to rush in again while lowering his body.

The big moves from long distances absolutely wouldn't hit. In addition, the sword had the advantage in reach. If he could slip into the zero distance, he could use small moves to disrupt the opponent's stance.

The sword which looked very heavy shouldn't be able to be swung consecutively. There should be a chance to close in if he could avoid its attack and match it with a counter.

—Keep focusing. Prepare to evade the attack coming from the point of the sword.

The gear in Haruyuki consciousness stepped up, at the same time, his field of vision narrowed down to focus on just the center. All his senses focused onto the tip of the shiny black long sword.

“.....Nowww!!”

Yelling, Haruyuki kicked the ground.

Lowering his posture to the limit, he shortened the ten meters distance at once.

Kirito's sword slid down halfway from the beginning middle position.

From the bottom. The point of the sword sent sparks flying over the ground while it slashed upwards to intercept Haruyuki, who was leaning forward. It was like the lethal fangs of the jet black snake——

Haruyuki opened only his left wing, causing his body to rotate almost ninety degrees and avoiding the attack. Even without the gauge, he can still use it to control his posture.

The sword groaned as it was raised, as it made a shallow cut on Silver Crow's chest armor. Heat and light that were at the tip of the sword disappeared shortly. At that moment Haruyuki stepped using his right foot with all his strength, his body raised for a right uppercut, a silvery light covered fist went straight for Kirito's abdomen——

It was parried just before it could strike. The right fist flowed to the outside, only grazing the shoulder.

But that was still within the calculations. Now both Kirito's hands couldn't return in time. The left short hook was thrown into the body that was left wide open. 'Don', he felt positive feedback. The body wrapped by the coat had stopped.

——*It hit!*

Now rush!!

"Oooo!!"

Haruyuki shouted and at the same time attacked using his right knee, which also hit. The damage wasn't good as the result of the distance which was too short, but it was good enough. Judging the conditions using consecutive moves while the opponent's movement was sealed, then deciding with a blow.

Pinning opponent's left arm with his right, and aiming short strikes with his left. The long sword was useless at this close range, in other words, the opponent's right arm was already considered dead.

At least, that was how it was supposed to be.

The smashing sensation that came from his left fist had dissipated because something pushed it from above. It was Kirito's open right hand, with all his fingers spread.

"Wha....."

W-Where is the sword!?

When that question arose, the next phenomenon had already happened.

The smooth, but terribly fast movement of Kirito's right fist, now touched Haruyuki's chest, suddenly emitting an orange light.

S-Special.....move!!

But, without a weapon——!?

The development was far beyond his expectations, his reaction was just a moment late. But it was too slow in the ultra speed battle.

Don!! With a great impact against the chest, Haruyuki was repelled backward.

However, there the damage was no big deal. It was probably just a move to create some distance. *Just to use this, he chose to drop the sword? Then, I won't give him a chance to pick it back up.*

To Haruyuki, who was hastily closing the distance back in, a further unexpected development happened in front of his eyes.

The empty handed Kirito made a big jump forward. While in the air, Kirito's right hand brandished over his head.

He is trying to pull another sword from his back? No, there is not enough time for that. Then he's going to attack using his hand to chop? Such an attack won't be able to pierce my armor.....

No.

The light which wrapped the right hand still didn't disappear. It meant the special move was still ongoing——

Both Haruyuki's legs went stiff, stopping the retreat he succeeded in earlier. In front of Haruyuki's eyes, Kirito's right hand grabbed on to something.

It was the sword grip. He didn't drop the sword on the ground. He threw it up above.

By the time Haruyuki realized it, the long sword was already wrapped in the color of blinding flame, and it cut down in a straight line.

He couldn't avoid or guard this time. A huge shock went through his chest from the attack on the left shoulder, Haruyuki was swallowed by a light effect and an explosion, then flew diagonally to the back and right.

* * *

"Body-sword composite sword skill, «Meteor Fall».But even saying so, he wouldn't hear it anyway."

I muttered while rubbing my abdomen which was hit earlier.

While it wasn't at the same level as if it happened in real world, the strength of the feedback from the pain should be enough to be considered illegal. Just from this pain alone proved this place wasn't in any game operated in year 2026 Japan.

But, with the big move finally making a clean hit, Silver Crow who was blown away in a flashy fashion and whose body was currently half buried under the rubble should have felt more pain. Of course, if a nervous system existed under that metal armor, that is.

Confirming with a glance at the stamina gauge, eating the punch and the knee at that close range took about fifteen percent, and Crow's was reduced by nearly thirty percent. Even though it looked like a metal robot, its defense wasn't that high, just like how fighting games were supposed to be.

Then for the fighting game, this difference in damage isn't enough to decide the outcome of the battle. It is not the situation I can relax in just after I got an attack in. Once I decided that, I kicked the ground to follow up with a sneak attack.

Suddenly the silvery body trembled——

The round metal helmet quickly lifted.

I could feel the strong light emitting from both eyes inside it.

Immediately after that, the rubble which buried half the silvery avatar had scattered violently in all directions.

Curling clouds of dust blown up by the wind covered the surroundings. I corrected my sword stance at this distance, waiting for my vision to clear up.

The chilled wind from the bottom of the stage carried the dust away.

Several seconds later, the trace of collapsed buildings appeared again —— but there was no trace of Silver Crow.

“What.....?”

I quickly looked left and right, my sides and my back was a huge open space, in front of me was the wide three-storey building. If it wasn't so tattered and decayed, this could be seen as a small scale school.

All the windows and entrances of the building were blocked with the metal plates, there were no stairs at the outer walls, so I'd notice if Crow cut across my left or right side. In other words, there should be nowhere to go during the brief moment my vision was blocked by the dust. In that case, where exactly did that silvery robot hide?

——No.

It isn't hidden. The special move gauge below Silver Crow's stamina gauge is around thirty percent charged, and even now it's still slowly decreasing. It means he's using the special move. I guess it was the reason he disappeared from my vision. Probably the power to go under the ground? Or the power of transparency?

I tensed up all my senses from below my feet, front, back, left, and right. Lowering my waist, softly setting up my sword, I readied my stance to intercept an attack from any direction, waiting for an action.

But.

Where Silver Crow appeared from was beyond my expectations.

Noticing something shining above my head, I quickly looked up

Then I saw it, the protruding sharp right toe, swooping down as if it was a spear from the silvery white avatar, with the big metal fins expanded to the left and right, shining dazzlingly on its back.

So that was really its propulsion equipment. But it shouldn't have the high-speed mobility to move its body above the ground to that degree.

Then those fins are —— wings!

I kicked the ground with as much force as possible to jump to the right.

But the Crow diving in a straight line used the stabilizers on both arms to change its angle, perfectly matching my movement.

“Guh.....”

While I let leak the voice, the sword in my right hand tried to parry the sharp toe.

But, defending against the attack with that degree of weight wasn't possible. Just like when receiving a heavy rush from the Salamander in ALO —— No, with greater force than the sword at that time, the dive kick directly hit my right shoulder.

* * *



For Silver Crow, who spent all of his level-up bonuses on expanding his flying ability, his greatest weapon is a swooping attack from high altitudes.

Just that would allow it to hit? Over the long period of time, Haruyuki had earnestly researched the technique for the half a year since becoming a Burst Linker. Although it was still too soon to be considered complete, it had become a

very important asset of his.

Power, or descending speed, and accuracy, or homing capability, both present together.

All the power of the wings was used for acceleration, while the arms and body did the orbit adjustment. To get the hang of it, he couldn't count how many times he had bitten the ground in vain.

However, the effort wasn't fruitless. He was able to capture Kirito, despite his formidable reaction speed.

—No.

Haruyuki shook the head in his mind. The dive kick directly hit the right shoulder, while on the ground, unable to escape, but his eyes could still follow Haruyuki's action.

Apparently, Kirito didn't know Silver Crow was an aerial type Duel Avatar. For those Burst Linkers he fought on a daily basis, the moment they lost sight of Haruyuki in the cloud of dust, they would be cautious above their heads, rather than the surroundings. But Kirito did the opposite, which opened the opportunity for Haruyuki's kick to hit. Thinking about it, the reaction ability to attempt to step and parry at that moment was really frightening.

Glancing at the HP gauge to confirm, Kirito's HP was just below fifty percent and had changed to yellow. Although the amount of damage had reversed the situation, but because the opponent already knows of his flying ability, it would be difficult for Haruyuki's kick to get a clean hit again. If that was the case, then he couldn't stop his hand now.

Haruyuki spread his wings for the second time, he started a low altitude dash towards the shadow crouching on the ground.

Kirito's sword manipulating arm was hit with the big move. The shock reverberating in his nerves should remain for at least ten more seconds, he wouldn't be able to swing the sword at full speed till then. Then, with this rush, the result of this battle will be decided!

"U.....oo!!"

With a short roar, Haruyuki got close to Kirito, then swung a big roundhouse kick diagonally upwards.

The method of using wings wasn't just swooping from high altitudes. At short range melee, the three dimensional actions, ignoring the gravity and inertia, was possible. This kick was also impossible to deal with.

The growl released from his right feet, which looked like a laser cutting across the space.

Of course, Kirito's right hand didn't move.

Sure hit——!!

While Haruyuki felt confident, at that moment,

Both of Kirito's eyes behind his long bangs shone brightly.

The left hand wrapped behind the black leather coat became hazy and disappeared.

KIAaan!! The high-pitched crashing sound. The blinding spark. Then the searing heat sensation.

The mid-air kick was repelled, then Haruyuki slapped down to the ground due to the returning momentum. He understood what had happened at that point.

In Kirito's left hand, which was still on his knee, raised high with the bright white shining like cat's eye, was a second sword.

The swordsman dressed in black stood up while still swaying, in both of his hands were the white and black long swords moving in an arc——

With a JyaKiin!, Both hands let out the clear sound.

* * *

I must admit.

I just had witnessed the opponent, Silver Crow's, endless power.

That name was so suitable with its meaning, the avatar's potential was mostly based on its flying ability. In other word, in ALO, it was what allowed me to press my advantage over the air raid ability specialists, Sylphs, in the aerial combat.

If that was the case, I would like to settle this battle with a mid-air combat. However, now my avatar isn't the Spriggan Kirito in ALO, but the SAO's Dual Blades Kirito. There were no wings on my back, and of course I couldn't fly.

In that case, if I don't squeeze all I have to use in this fight, there would be no chance of winning.

Thoughts about this battle being the result from the abnormality of the quantum circuit had disappeared from my mind. My whole body was wrapped around with the tension I've tasted dueling with truly formidable foes.

It had been one and a half years since feeling the trustworthy weight of the Elucidator in my right hand, and the Dark Repulser in my left. I slowly stood and stared wordlessly to the silvery white avatar.

The pale sparks scattered all over the deep wounds at its chest and left foot, around forty percent of its HP bar remained. Thin smoke smoldered from the right shoulder, my bar had a similar amount.

However, there were still some tricks under the sleeves on both sides, the victor shall be decided by the following clash.

The wings on the back of Silver Crow stretched wide.

* * *

Watching the mild silhouette of «Kirito», who was carrying two swords in standing position, Haruyuki finally realized the true identity of the pressure he felt since the beginning of the battle.

It was similar.

To the pressure from the Black King, «Black Lotus».

More than the form of both swords, or wearing color on the whole body, the most similarity was the «Immeasurable».

Truthfully, Haruyuki almost never watched KuroyukiHime fighting at her full power. From his memories, once conducted in the unlimited neutral field, in the battle against the similarly level 9 Yellow King, that time had left him with the impression that both sides still had spare energy left.

That feeling of bottomless strength. If this person had become seriously serious, just what kind of fury would be unleashed?

The same thing could be felt here, what this Burst Linker Kirito had behind his back.

—*What if this guy really is as strong as KuroyukiHime-senpai, I won't have any chance to win.*

Haruyuki's mind was so determined.

But why was the inside of his chest armor full of wounds burning hot? It wouldn't cool down at all. Far from that, it even blazed more and more, sending heat to the tip of his limbs.

I want to fight. Burn all of Silver Crow and then all of Arita Haruyuki to the exhausting limit, I want to beat this strong foe.

Recalling the moment when the slowly walking figure of the dual blades swordsman caused him to unintentionally shout Burst Out in fear, a subtle smile floated under the silver mask.

It might seemed like the difference in numerical potential of avatars was big, but he was bad at manipulating his consciousness efficiently. Kirito was one step ahead in the ability to analyse situation and ability to react. Even though it was just their first meeting, Haruyuki had ended up behind on everything.

In that case, the only way was to bet on the cornerstone of his humble self-confidence, his «Speed».

Believe in the wings on the back, produced from the craving for speed. Concentrate.

“.....Cross it. Go beyond it.”

Just as he murmured, the hue of his field of vision had shifted slightly.

The background noise disappeared, and the movement of the sparks drifting in the air became gradually slower.

However, he didn't sense these changes, as all of Haruyuki's spirit was focused on his dual bladed opponent.

* * *

«Silver Crow»'s spirit's state had changed, I felt that fact.

Probably, the opponent also determined this as the climax of the battle. The wings on the back opened wide, but he didn't take off, just slowly lowering his waist and setting up both his hands, a natural posture to receive my attack.

Betting everything on the line, where all hope was placed.

I finally noticed I made a blurred thin smile on my mouth.

I really longed for this kind of battle. I might have been in many serious battles in ALO or GGO, and even have trouble surviving in a few of those, but up until now there was never a time I tasted the pain from the sense of tension before.

It was really strange. I wasn't sure why Silver Crow and I were fighting in the first place. It was only the experimental machine's troubles that had led to the accidental encounter with him but——

.....No.

That is why, how to say it? The battle wasn't in the well known game, and everything was wrapped under mysterious circumstances, causing me to feel excited.

It wasn't just that. Carrying the [KIRITO] name tag, holding my beloved swords in both hands, being half hearted was not allowed.

“.....From here on, you'd better go all out.”

I uttered in a low whisper——

My right foot made a big step forward, readying the sword skill motion.

Both swords were bathed in a vivid orange light.

At the next moment, I started a long distance charge, aiming at Silver Crow like a bullet fired from a cannon.

Dual blades rush sword skill, «Double Circular».

* * *

The shape of Kirito, who was controlling the trajectory of the twin shining swords which penetrated the depth of the darkness, like a flame from a fire dragon.

He kicked his fear of wanting to flee to the sky away, Haruyuki just waited.

His consciousness had been geared up to the limit, but it all happened in just the blink of an eye.

In front of Haruyuki, Kirito's body rotated upward. The black sword in his right hand pulled the helix of the flame from below and slashed straight up furiously.

The point of the sword split Haruyuki's left hand's armor open and bounced it upwards.

Silver Crow's wrist armor possessed the highest strength of the entire body. Despite that, the sword ripped the arm apart in the middle, the pretty sparks from the slash wound flowed into the night sky.

“Ku.....!”

Haruyuki leaked a voice that came from his throat through his mouth, but the lethal attack would be the following strike.

Following right behind the slashing trail remaining in mid-air, the white sword in Kirito's left hand thrust in a straight line. The tip was aimed with fearful accuracy at his neck, it was much faster than the attacks from any previous confrontation with Burst Linkers —— be it bullets or laser.

Haruyuki's aim was to catch hold of that blade.

However, he couldn't see any possibility of success at all. Even avoiding it wasn't allowed, it would be accurate to say it was an attack at the speed of god.

Therefore, Haruyuki decided to spread his palm, at the risk of losing his right hand —— used the center of his palm



to catch the tip of the sword.

He felt all the resistance of the sword piercing his hand, but continued stretching. The speed of the thrust dropped just slightly, however, it gave Haruyuki a moment of opportunity to twist his neck away. The weak vibration transmitted from the right side of his neck, the blade deeply cut there and split out at the back.

Stamina gauge is, ten percent remaining.

This bet is——

My win!!

As his consciousness shouted, Haruyuki used his right palm which was penetrated by the sword to grab Kirito's left hand.

“U.....oooo!!”

Yelling, both feet kicked the ground, both wings slapped the air, Haruyuki's fully charged special move gauge was burnt to exhaustion to let him fly into the night sky.

In the midst of full acceleration, he turned his body around. The momentum of inertia was still positive, he then threw Kirito's body above down with all his might.

The sword was extracted from the palm, along with a thin line of sparks. Without the violently built up momentum, the dual blades swordsman without wings was no longer ascending.

In that situation, what surprised him was, there was no sign of struggle from the swordsman at all. His limbs weren't twirling, both hands and feet were spread out, trying to control his posture.

However——

Once this happened, there was nothing he could do.

Most Burst Linkers might not be aware of the basic rule governing physical attacks, which was the reaction to the action.

Be it a punch or kick, sword or blunt weapon, the foot must be firmly planted, without a ground of mass to place a foot onto, power wouldn't arise. This was the reason melee attacks were weak in the «Ice and Snow» stage, where the ground under the feet was abnormally slippery.

Then in mid-air, there was no ground.

Even if Kirito swings the sword, the blade will not have that formidable power anymore.

On the other hand, Haruyuki could use driving force from the wings to kick the air. So even if both strike each other, he should be able to do a lot more damage.

“Now.....”

Losing the ascending momentum, staring at Kirito's silhouette once it reached the topmost point, Haruyuki yelled.

“Is the endddddddddd!!”

Douuu, the sound of air rang in the ears.

He put his right foot as the pivot point for the rushing momentum, and shot off a long ranged roundhouse kick.

Kirito tried to intercept it using his left sword, however his defence was abruptly bounced back with a high-pitched sound, the kicked pierced deeply into his flank.

Haruyuki then dashed after the black dressed figure which flowed down through the air like a bullet. His next attack was deflected by the crossing hands, he then headbutt using his helmet. Along with a heavy impact, it violently hit the center of Kirito's chest.

At this point, the stamina gauge of both sides had ten percent remaining.

The aerial gauge had less remaining. But it was just enough to spend on the next decisive attack.

Exerting as much power as possible in his right fist, Haruyuki began the final rush.

At that moment——

Both Kirito's eyes suddenly widened. Haruyuki noticed his longcoat which was streaming violently over the entire body, wrapped in a thin red aura.

The black long sword in the right hand was enveloped in a blood-like crimson light.

——*Special move!*

——*I don't fear it!!*

Haruyuki clenched his teeth, and continued straight in. *That was just a long range thrusting attack, but during mid-air with no ground to step on, with the body flowing backwards. That kind of move wouldn't go through Silver Crow's armor!*

"U.....o.....!"

Haruyuki roared. In front of his vision,

Kirito's body turned around.

Giiiii! With a loud jet engine-like sound, the tremendous power could be felt vividly from the straight thrusting move fired from the right hand, brightly penetrating the night sky.

——Approaching Haruyuki, in exactly the opposite direction.

"Wh....."

Kirito's body received reaction from the strong thrusting attack and retorted ferociously towards a gasping Haruyuki.

The sword in his left hand glazed the glistening pallid crescent moon in Haruyuki's vision——

Cut into the center of the chest. Haruyuki could feel both hot and cold at the same time where the point of the sword touched.

———*What's with this guy.*

All the remaining special gauge was used not on the attack but to get the driving force for a single moment.

Admiration crossed his mind. But at the same time, Haruyuki's consciousness attempted a final counterattack.

The right fist pushed straight across the sword trail. But the reach wasn't enough. He then reflexively stretching his fingertips, making the shape of a hand-knife. The sharp fingers lined up, glistening white like a sword.

—————*Reach it!! At least, I'll convey my final struggle until the end!!*

The white sword pierced through Silver Crow's chest.

Silvery fingertips touched Kirito's coat.

At that moment, Kirito's avatar soundlessly changed into white light particles.

The sword which lost its substance went past Haruyuki's body, Haruyuki's right hand also passed through Kirito's body.

Both of them made contact in mid-air, the bodies blended together.

In the passing moment, Haruyuki felt a sound within his head. A soft, yet dignified, and comfortable voice resounded.

『It was a good duel. Someday — let's fight again.』

Then, the mysterious Burst Linker «Kirito» body vanished from the imagination field.

In Haruyuki's center of vision, for the first time he sees, the system message [DISCONNECTION] blinking.

* * *

“.....iiichan. Onii-chan!”

I raised my gaze to the source of the voice, on the other side of the table, from the sharp lips of Suguha.

“Ah, s-sorry. What was it again?”

“Since just now that your hand hasn't moved much at all, isn't the food good? That was what I asked!”

To Suguha who made a sully look once more, I quickly shook my head.

“T-That's not it. It's delicious, this oden.”

I filled my large open mouth with a potato, and showed a nodding gesture, but Suguha's mood wasn't getting better.

“.....This isn't oden though, it's Pot-au-feu.”

———*Pot-au-feu with whole eggs only, huh*, of course that thought didn't leave my mouth. I quickly emptied the plate and asked for a refill, trying to settle the mood.

Our mother was late as usual, so today's dinner was just me and Suguha. At that point I went back into silence, causing the table to be quiet again. But while eating seconds of the french-style oden, my thoughts were pulled back to the experience of the strange incident which occurred this afternoon once more.

It was about four hours ago, at the mysterious battle game field, the serious battle with the unknown avatar «Silver Crow» had unfolded, but regrettably just before the result would be decided, my connection was cut off.

I told Higa Takeru about what happened after jumping out of the experimental machine.

However, Higa had a doubtful face about the fact, so I connected back into that game, this time for the exchanging of information rather than sword and fist.

What I saw in the second Dive was — as described in the beginning, just a scene of a lovely forest. There was no stamina gauge nor time count on the field of vision, the battle opponent also wasn't present. After we took the data as planned, Higa and the other staff also Dived just in case, but no one saw the mysterious human shadow at all.

So, the quantum circuit of the experimental machine was somehow «Fixed». It could be said that the machine was thoroughly satisfied from my battle with Crow.....

That battle was probably just a dream I had from FullDiving in the fourth generation machine for the first time. And for now, the part-time job was over, Higa told me that just as I was about to leave the laboratory.

However, I couldn't believe such explanation, from the Silver Crow's splendid movements, the flame of fighting spirit burning at an ultra-high temperature, to the duel which was like to burn each other down, it couldn't be just a dream.

“What are you thinking of for a while now?”

I woke up from my thoughts after hearing Suguha's voice.

So as not to offend her again, and also to get her involved in what was in my mind, I used my fork to pick a Vienna into my mouth, and said,

“Hmm..... Today, I dueled with an amazing opponent. But due to circuit irregularity, I can't say I won.....”

“Heh? Onii-chan's battle with an unknown player ended up in a draw? Does such a person exist?”

Attracted to my story, Suguha's body leaned forward. Apparently she thought it had happened in ALO, I left it that way in order to keep the contract I made to not disclose information about the experimental machine.

“How to say it..... Amazing, naturally flying. It was like seeing a real voluntary flight.”

“.....? What do you mean?”

Suguha tilted her head, while still holding her fork.

“Well, for the voluntary flight in ALO, you really don't just use thoughts to control the wings, it actually requires the use of shoulder blade movement too. During acceleration would be like this.....”

I pulled both arms backward, causing both shoulder blades to get closer.

“Then, during deceleration.”

This time the arms was stretched out in front, the gap between shoulder blades opened wider.

“With experience, the actual movement can be minimized, but I don't mean it can be completely eliminated. That's why it interfered with the attack during the air raid.”

Suguha gave a big nod at my words.

“That's right. When swinging the sword, stretching the arm cannot be avoided and at the same time, it acts as a brake command to the wings too. The attack which completely kills the momentum of a full speed flight, only the lance type weapon is an exception due to its stance being based on the waist. But that can't be helped anyway, because humans don't have real wings, so we have to substitute it with some part of the body.”

“Yeah..... But that guy could move his limbs without causing any conflict with the wings at all. Even during the fierce full speed dash, he could still accelerate while throwing the fist forward.”

“Ehh—, something like that can't be possible.”

I show a slight smile to Suguha who made the rounded eyes.

“Yeah, it’s not possible. Maybe it was too fast to notice..... Or he wasn’t human but a birdman so he could operate the wings separately, something like that.....”

———In that world, something exceeding my understanding of a man-machine interface existed.

Yes..... Perhaps, unlike the AmuSphere which picked up the body’s movement commands from the medulla oblongata, it read the image directly from the brain, no, the consciousness.

It couldn’t be possible. Consciousness, or rather, to access such things as the soul itself.

But without thinking that way, Silver Crow’s movements couldn’t be understood.

Changing the image power, that is the human mind, into data, which was the actual power in the real world. Yes, if we think about it, hadn’t that experimental machine read my «Self-image» and created the swordsman Kirito’s avatar? In other words, Higa’s fourth generation FullDive machine communicated with the soul rather than the brain cell..... It could be said that, in that world, there’s the possibility that the Diver can pull out and use the ultimate kind of power, which is the «Mind Power».

I closed my eyes tightly once, then looked at Suguha and finally smiled.

“.....W-What are you smiling for, Onii-chan?”

Towards the discomfited Sylph swordswoman, who acts like a possessed speed-holic in the sky, I said,

“By some chance, one day.....no, in the surprisingly near future, we might be able to really fly. Not a pseudo-voluntary flight.....but flapping the wings created by the mind.”

Suguha blinked in surprise——

Her whole face smiled cheerfully.

“Yeah, that would be great.”

I nodded in return, and bit the Vienna, my mind returned to that figure once more.

Flying across the dark night sky, the beautiful silvery white crow.

* * *

“.....yuki-kun. Oi, are you listening, Haruyuki-kun?”

He lifted his face in a hurry at the call, as KuroyukiHime emitted a perilous glare on the opposite side of the round white table.

“Ah, s-s-sorry! I was just thinking about something.....”

“Ho, I wonder what kind of important consideration has distracted you during this discussion with me.”

Haruyuki gulped, and drank iced latte from his paper cup to stall for time.

There were no other students in the quiet cafeteria lounge after school. But Haruyuki still looked around just in case, affirming the conversation wouldn’t be heard by anyone else, before mumbling the answer.

“Erm, well, the truth is.....I had fought with a strange Burst Linker.....”

Those words intentionally omitted the ‘during today’s lunch break’ part. Furthermore, the lunch break when the unidentified enemy showed up in the school’s local network, was comparable to the big «Dusk Taker Incident» which happened in spring. Actually, after that battle, all the members of Nega Nebulas must be warned immediately, but Haruyuki didn’t do so as he felt the enemy wasn’t real.

Because he felt neither maliciousness nor hostility from that battle opponent. All he could feel from him was excitement and joy. Despite waging a fierce battle, Haruyuki was left with some sort of freshness in his mind.

Maybe he won’t show up again.

While he still didn’t know why he was so convinced about that, Haruyuki started speaking piece by piece.

“.....It was weird, but he was amazing. His weapons were two swords.....Which he could swing as if they were weightless, I was almost unable to track his special moves.”

“Two.....swords.”

KuroyukiHime furrowed her small eyebrows while murmuring to herself. But she stared blankly at Haruyuki then immediately returned to her normal facial expression while encouraging him to continue.

“No, there’s nothing. Then? Did you win?”

“Ah, well.....he was disconnected just before the conclusion.....but, if it continued, I am sure I would lose. My final attack probably couldn’t reach him.”

“Ho. Being able to defeat you in close combat. What’s the color and level of that person?”

Haruyuki shook his head with a troubled face to KuroyukiHime’s question.

“About that, either it was a system error or he used some kind of a filter..... color name and level were both not shown. Just the color of his appearance was, well....., really black.”

Towards the «Black King» who narrowed her eyes again, Haruyuki didn’t think too deeply into her reaction, and threw the question he had thought of during the battle at her.

“Oh, senpai. I wanted to ask this for a long time now, what are the characteristics of the «Black»?”

KuroyukiHime blinked blankly then showed a big bitter smile.

“Suddenly asking such a question...Haruyuki-kun.”

“Eh? No, erm, s-sorry!”

Haruyuki unintentionally shrank the upper part of his body, this time a smile which was like from an intelligent older sister towards her younger brother, floated on KuroyukiHime’s face.

“No, there was no need to apologize. Because, to that question, «I also do not know».”

“.....Heh?”

“That said, there will be a certain degree I’ll have to guess.”

The glass containing iced tea made a ringing sound, KuroyukiHime stared at the pale afternoon sunlight, then explained,

“The three primary colors on the upper part of the color circle..... «Neighboring Blue», «Remote Red», and «Indirect Yellow». And then there are properties in the middle «Green» and «Purple». With the exception of metal colors, almost all of the Duel Avatars are classified somewhere between those links. As the purity of the color goes higher, the characteristic purity also increases.”

Up until that point was what Haruyuki already understood. For example, his friend Cyan Pile had a fairly bright blue color which slightly tilted in the purple direction. So his initial equipment «Pile Driver» was combined with the ranged attack power.

Seeing Haruyuki nod in response, KuroyukiHime continued,

“Conversely, as the color purity lowers so does the characteristic purity. For your friend «Ash Roller», he is more like the green than the grey type. That is because he spent most of his potential into strengthening the exterior of his unique bike. At the same time the purity of his color had declined. But why an avatar’s color is darkened, while another is brightened, I still can’t give a proper explanation yet.”

“Become darker.....or brighter.....”

Repeatedly murmuring, Haruyuki finally understood. When an avatar’s color rapidly darkened, the destination was surely black — the «Pure Black». And conversely, white existed, the «Pure White», when going brighter as well. It was probably very unique on both extreme ends, but he couldn’t understand clearly the reason behind the divide of both black and white being the exact opposite.

While Haruyuki twisted his neck, KuroyukiHime suddenly murmured,

“«Black» is the «Rejected Color» — It’s what I’ve been aware of for a long time.”

“Eh....., r-rejected.....?”

“Yes, refused to be dyed in any color, the color of possessing nothingness, it couldn’t go anywhere else other than that, the bottom of the deep well of color.....”

With those desolate words, KuroyukiHime shook her head before Haruyuki could speak. Then her light colored lips showed a faint smile.

“But....., just but. Maybe it isn’t really that way, recently I started to think like that, thus.....”

Suddenly she moved her delicate right hand over the luxurious table, and grabbed hold of Haruyuki’s left hand, causing him to be taken aback.

“.....Because you had held my hand many times. This me who couldn’t interact with other people, always reminding me.”

Haruyuki’s face was red to his ears from the unusually gentle pupils gazing at him, he gripped her cold hand in return and would not let go. His heart throbbing, but unable to say a decent line, he just grabbed her hand as if trying to pass his earnest feelings from his heart with the touch of the fingers.

—*Black is absolutely not the rejected color. Because it was you, without a doubt, who stretched her hand to me who was alone in the bottom of the well, who gently wrapped and healed my wounds.*

—*That’s right, that guy was the same.*

—*That black swordsman was also had a similar tranquility. Receiving everything, both giving great support and strength.*

Haruyuki felt the «Kirito» inside his mind was pushing his back, he timidly lifted his face, and somehow managed to

speak.

“Erm……, well, black objects don’t reflect any light, causing it to looked black, it is what I learned in class. So……so, it surely isn’t the lonely color. I think it’s the warmest color, more than any other color.”

KuroyukiHime widened her eyes for a moment—— then,

A beautiful smile floated on her face like a blooming lotus bud.

Guest Illustrator / abec

Accel World: Volume 10 Author Notes

 web.archive.org/web/20130918045400/http://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php

Author's Notes

I am Kawahara Reki. I give you "Accel World 10 Elements".

.....It came to me that this is the tenth book that I've written so far. This story was born from a simple idea of 'an interesting fighting game with the real world as its stage', 'but you might be runned over by a car for leisurely dueling for many minutes', and so I added an element called «Acceleration» and started writing, all of the other settings were added one after the other since I started writing.

Such haphazard story, moreover, by the hands of a person who's basically overcome by laziness, it was all because of everyone's guidance who's been reading till now that I've continuously went on and passed till the tenth book after so long.

That said, I surveyed existing series that have 10 books, let alone 20 books, in the same label dengeki bunko and it turns out that they are not yet in a situation to have a sense of ending. (laughs)

Is the stage finally set on the story? It is in that place somehow, from now on, the «Six Kings of Pure Color»'s legions and «Acceleration Research Society» will at last be stirred in a battle..... as expected to be but, it is a place that I don't understand and I can't write it either.....

On such an anything goes story, I'll kindly be in your care from now on.

To talk a little about this 10th volume, it has become a collection of short story intervals this time. It is a compilation of three small experiments, going waaay back in the past on "Sound of Water from a Distant Day", a story from Kuroyukihime's point of view for the first time on "The Farthest Sound of Waves" and lastly, a cross-over of my other series «Sword Art Online» on "Versus" as the line-up. Concerning particularly at the last part "Versus", the relatedness of both series on this and that were peeked through in the content but, as the author, I have the stance of «there is no clear link between the two works» at present. The story this time had the conjecture of SAO protagonist Kirito-shi during a play «caused by a parallel world interference of a quantum computer» and so as the explanation on this SS carnival, please read and enjoy. I'm sorry for just asking selfishly every time.....

It will return again to the main story from volume 11 and it is expected to start off at the «Seven Kings Conference» where Haruyuki-kun was summoned as a witness.

To Miki-shi who I shifted various responsibilities on anime, game or drama CD as I looked like in a Black Vise escaping pace, to HIMA-shi who I asked to illustrate on an absurd continuous schedule of October to December, and to the guest illustrator abec-shi, on this very abnormal incident, thank you very much!

Finally, please keep on being of acquaintance and my best regards to every reader for the year 2012!

A certain day on October 2011, Kawahara Reki